

Decentering the 1979 Iranian Revolution: Trauma Theory as a Guide to Literature on Twentieth  
Century Iran

by

Neeloufar Hematti

A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2021

© 26 March 2021

Neeloufar Hematti

*For Maman Mina and Baba Parviz*

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Adela Pinch for her constant support and unwavering guidance in every stage of creating this thesis. Adela was a vital component of writing and polishing this work. Her ability to bring a much-needed sense of lightness and joy to such a massive academic undertaking was invaluable.

I'd also like to thank my advisor, Khaled Mattawa, for his unmatched expertise and wisdom in creating a piece of literary criticism I am proud to share with others. At first, I wasn't prepared for his use of "surgical equipment," but my thesis and my status as a student of literature are all the better for it.

Next, I'd like to thank Simon Rivers and Laura Benjamin for instilling the confidence in me that I was capable of completing a senior thesis when I was at the beginning of my journey in English 298 Spring of 2019. Simon has also been one of my guiding lights in the U-M English Department and making sure I was able to graduate, you should thank him, Mom.

Thank you to my very own copyediting team, Alyssa, Arun, Rachel, and Sarah, for reigning in my wordy sentences and comma splices.

Finally, to my parents and younger sister. I would never have been able to get to this point without your unwavering support. Thank you, Baba for the daily facetime calls and Mama for giving me the idea for this thesis in the first place. Faranak, take this thesis as your sign of all the things you could do if you committed to Michigan and Go Blue!

## Abstract

This thesis is aimed at providing a new entry point for analyzing the 1979 Iranian Revolution through literary representations of trauma in twentieth century Iran. Because the 1979 Revolution holds such a large place in historical and literary depictions of Iran, the texts chosen do not directly focus on the Revolution. Instead, my primary sources of interest focus on life before and after the Revolution in order to demonstrate a continuity in the shared experience of undergoing personal experiences of trauma over the twentieth century. In my introduction, I draw on much of Nikki Keddie's history of Iran from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century as a means of defending the assertion that Iranian collective trauma did not begin or end in 1978.

While the topic of Iran during the twentieth century could be approached from a variety of schools of thought, such as political science, international affairs, and global history, for my work trauma theory provided the most useful means of examining the multiple angles available for literary analysis. In my analysis, trauma refers to a form of pain and suffering that has both short- and long-term impacts on individuals and those around them. Trauma theory's strength as a literary school of thought actually lies in its weaknesses. While it is close to impossible to make any black or white assertions about the trauma of others or even our own, trauma theory functions by examining the oftentimes painful grey space that we attempt to avoid. Within this grey space, however, is room to emphasize the push and pull between the sometimes rigid boundaries that limit interacting with trauma. It is this methodology of focusing on the give and take that drives my analysis forward without being overly preoccupied with the inability to find one correct solution to the looming issue of Iranian trauma.

I put this methodology into practice by analyzing three different primary sources about Iran during the time leading up to and after the 1979 Revolution. The first of these texts is *The Saffron Kitchen* by Yasmin Crowther. In the novel, Crowther presents the historical precedent for the Revolution within the context of both contemporary London and 1950's Iran. The novel illustrates the cyclical nature of generational trauma between a mother and daughter, creating a larger metaphor for understanding the foundations of the unbalanced dynamic between Iran and Western Powers.

My next text, Dalia Sofer's *The Septembers of Shiraz*, is a novel that dives into the traumatic experiences of one Jewish family impacted by the Iranian carceral state after the Revolution. Their experiences can again be magnified to depict more universal themes of trauma. Like from *The Saffron Kitchen*, *The Septembers of Shiraz* depicts a historical continuity in trauma for groups of Iranians while also demonstrating the significant differences in family member's experiences of collective trauma.

My final primary source and only non-fiction primary source, *Kissing the Sword* by Shahrnush Parsipur, follows this precedent of demonstrating temporal continuity in Iranian trauma exclusively within the context of the Iranian carceral state. When read in conjunction with each other, my texts provide a steady timeline of Iranian trauma while also highlighting their own unique entry points for analyzing the specific details of twentieth century Iranian trauma.

**Keywords: Iran, Iranian Revolution, Trauma Theory, Gender, Incarceration, Religious Minorities**

## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
i.    Trauma Theory Opening the Door for Analyzing the 1979 Revolution.....	2
ii.   Combatting Biases Through Historical Context .....	4
iii.  Trauma Theory for Reading Literature About Twentieth Century.....	10
Chapter One: Gender and 1950’s Iran: Tracing Iranian Generational Trauma.....	13
i.    Inherited Gendered Trauma .....	15
ii.   Iran and the West: A Case Study in Toxic Marriages.....	17
iii.  The Despair of Sexual Trauma.....	22
iv.   Medicinal Poetry.....	24
Chapter Two: Unpacking Layers of Trauma in the Religious Minority Experience.....	27
i.    Oscillations in the Iranian-Jewish Experience.....	28
ii.   The 1979 Revolution: Pulling the Curtain on Cultural and Class Tensions.....	31
iii.  Incarceration as a Metaphor for Shared Iranian Trauma.....	36
Chapter Three: Dismantling the Binaries of Iranian Incarceration.....	38
i.    Blurring Temporal Lines Within the Twentieth Century Iranian Carceral State...39	
ii.   Who’s to Blame? Difficulties in Distinguishing the Tortured from the Torturer..42	
iii.  Shared Memories of Iranian Incarceration.....	45
iv.   Weaponizing Familial Relationships.....	47
v.    Viewing Prison Outside of the Carceral Bubble.....	48
Epilogue.....	51
Works Consulted.....	53

## Introduction:



1

The illustration above comes from Marjane Satrapi's comic-novel, *Persepolis: The Story of A Childhood*, which is one of the most well-known literary depictions of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The text combined with Satrapi's illustrations of herself as a young girl portrays a child's understanding of the Iranian Revolution. Originally written in French, *Persepolis* has functioned as a sort of literary rite of passage around the world for learning about the Iranian Revolution. In my own experiences, whenever I share the topic of my thesis someone always asks, "so have you read *Persepolis*?" The number of times I have been asked this exact question signals to me how this singular piece of literature has become synonymous with the global event it attempts to shed a light on.

Written as a memoir in the form of a comic, Marjane translates her childhood and adolescence into a series of words and images; Marjane grows up alongside a country that is constantly undergoing oscillating economic, social, and political turmoil. The memoir itself has

---

<sup>1</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, (Pantheon Books: 2003), 9.

taken on a life of its own, even being turned into an animated film, but both the book and film are banned in Iran, a country known for its rife censorship. One reason for *Persepolis's* immense popularity is its form and genre. The comic form of the novel increases accessibility to a frankly dense and historically complicated event, which is a strength in terms of increasing visibility of underrepresented literary content. In the excerpt I have included, Satrapi creates graphic panels that are extremely rich and self-reflective in attempting to understand the revolution from a young girl's perspective while also adding her developed perceptions of the broader implications of the Revolution. However, because of its comic form, *Persepolis* has a tendency to package and tie a bow around the trauma of the 1979 Revolution in an oversimplified way. As thought-provoking as a comic book that tells the story of the 1979 Revolution through a young girl's eyes might be, there is still the cognitive tendency to sprint through the comic novel not fully digesting and understanding what is being read. Still, Satrapi's comic novel paves the way for reading and analyzing a variety of literary sources about twentieth century Iran and their relationship to the Revolution from a more critical standpoint.

### *Trauma Theory Opening the Door for Analyzing the 1979 Iranian Revolution*

In my overarching goal of analyzing the literary context around the 1979 Iranian Revolution, I will argue that trauma theory is the optimum school of literary thought for analyzing such a complex and interconnected moment in twentieth century Iranian history. The preliminary step in performing a trauma-based analysis of literature is actually defining what trauma means within the context of my work. In my analysis of twentieth century Iranian literature, I draw on two separate definitions of trauma. First is Michelle Balev's definition of trauma referring to "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts

previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society.”<sup>2</sup> I wish to further qualify Balev's definition with Bjorn Krondorfer’s definition of trauma as being “caused by a severe violation of integrity (often described as a shattering of self and the world), and it has a lingering, long-term impact.”<sup>3</sup> These two definitions converge on an understanding of trauma as causing an acute and painful disruption not only within an individual, but within their relationships with the world around them. As established by Krondorfer, it is not the sort of injury that can be healed overnight. Instead, trauma requires an ongoing form of reckoning to slowly lessen and cope with the irreversible harm done.

The 1979 Revolution is an example of a traumatic event that fits within this framework. The Revolution severely disrupted the lives of millions of Iranians. The Revolution can then be seen as playing into the give and take of individual versus collective forms of trauma in how individual accounts of Iranian trauma become just one piece of a larger collective framework bound together by the overlapping of shared experiences of trauma. For example, multiple generations of Iranians are forced to reckon with the Revolution as the religious authoritarian regime that took the Shah’s place is still in power over thirty years later. While I hope to account for how the trauma of the Revolution persists today, it is equally significant to examine the underlying historical factors that joined together to lead to an eruption of revolution. As a result, instead of seeing the Revolution as an isolated event, it can be contextualized as a singular moment in a tumultuous twentieth century for Iran at the hands of higher political forces.

---

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Balev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 41, no. 2 (2008): 150.

<sup>3</sup>Björn Krondorfer, “Unsettling Empathy: Intercultural Dialogue in the Aftermath of Historical and Cultural Trauma” in *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition* (Verlag Barbara Budrich:2016), 91.

### *Combatting Biases Through Historical Context*

A key step for comprehensively analyzing literature about Iran during the twentieth century is to decenter the 1979 Revolution as the only source of political, socioeconomic, cultural, and gendered trauma. Part of the difficulty of learning about twentieth century Iranian history, a difficulty which I myself ran into often, is the lack of continuity in terms of tracking political leadership in Iran. To understand the Iranian political context and the complications from other socioeconomic conditions in the twentieth century, it helped my own thought process to keep track of the foundational moments in Iranian history in the form of questions, enabling me to dig into confusion that came from such a historically disruptive century for Iran and the world more broadly. The first of these guiding questions is why Iran was of such interest to leaders in the West. The answer to this question actually goes beyond what might be the typical first assumption of oil. While oil would become a significant factor in American-Iranian relations later in the 20th century, a large part of answering this question comes from examining Great Britain and Russia's conflict over control of the region of southwestern Asia. Notably, in the nineteenth century, Iran was "important to international trade and strategy" and as a result was a point of contention between Great Britain and Russia.<sup>4</sup> Great Britain was drawn to the region because of Iran's strategic position in the Persian Gulf that was employed as means of maintaining control over their colonial stronghold of India. Opposing Great Britain's colonial pursuits was Russia, who engaged in several conflicts with Iran over land in the North, including parts of Georgia, which it hoped to seize to increase its imperial land holdings.

This British-Russian conflict would open the door for further involvement by Western powers in Iranian affairs in a way that significantly impacted political, socioeconomic, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, (Yale University Press, 2006).

cultural facets of Iranian society. Early in the twentieth century, Iran would undergo a form of top-down modernization. Through interactions with the West, Iran, a country with large sects of citizens at that time living primarily tribal and nomadic lifestyles with a reliance on agriculture and local trade, would see its “economy and society [were] gradually transformed through interaction with an increasingly industrialized and imperialist West.”<sup>5</sup> In the top-down form of modernization that took place, it was the majority of those at the bottom of the Iranian socioeconomic system who would bear the brunt of Western involvement, and receive very few of the benefits from the increased economic interaction between Iran and the West. This dynamic is exemplified in the development of modernized transportation lines in Iran that were created to “facilitate Western penetration [rather] than to link Iran internally.”<sup>6</sup> Over time, the recurrence of political choices that harmed Iranians would lead to a general distrust of Western political involvement.<sup>7</sup> Distrust of the West would be a key pillar of the 1979 Revolution, but these sentiments were based on decades of exploitation by the West. It is then not unwarranted that years later Iranians would protest the removal of a leader like Mohammed Shah who was so politically interlaced with the West

A notable figure in Iranian-Western political relations during the 20th century was not just Mohammed Shah, who left office as a result of the Revolution, but also his father, Reza Shah. Reza Shah came to power under the guise of a political coup. The circumstances around Reza Shah’s claim to the throne is in direct opposition to the Pahlavi family’s attempt to make it seem as if Iran had a single continuous monarchy for 2,500 years, a fictional precedent that

---

<sup>5</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 58.

everyday Iranians went along with under the Pahlavis.<sup>8</sup> As Iran's leader, Reza Shah attempted to modernize Iranian life from the top down, through reforms directed towards the lives of women. These reforms, however, demonstrated a disconnect between what Reza Shah perceived as progress based on Western notions of advancing women's rights, which resulted in disappointment in the lofty goals that were being set, instead of making small, effective changes that Iranian women would actually deem necessary. His reforms such as forced unveiling created even more cultural and religious division amongst Iranians instead of leaving the option up to the women themselves.

Reza Shah's rule was also significant in relation to his eventual abdication in 1941 at the hands of Allied Powers after his delay in removing German soldiers from Iran. Entering WWII, Iran had already borne the severe physical aftermath of WWI. Iran was not directly involved in either war, but given its strategic location in the Middle East, Iran would be invaded by both Great Britain and Russia during WWII. These invasions illuminate a notable example of Iran bearing the trauma of wars they didn't have a direct interest in.

The damage caused by WWII to its sovereignty and resources would be just the start of an even more politically tumultuous second half of the twentieth century for Iran. The next notable leader in Iran at this time would be Prime Minister Mosaddeq. Mosaddeq became involved in politics in 1905 with the start of the Constitutional Revolution and would be appointed Prime Minister from 1951 to 1953. Many of the political battles Mosaddeq faced in his decades-long career stemmed from attempting to rebuild a more autonomous and prosperous Iran following the impact of WWII. Mosaddeq, however, faced an uphill battle given how the US took Great Britain's place in dominating Iranian affairs. Mosaddeq was simultaneously

---

<sup>8</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 103.

attempting to alleviate Iran's socioeconomic problems, such as the persistence of sharecropping and bread riots, while Americans like Arthur Millspaugh had practically complete control of Iran's finances.<sup>9</sup> Mosaddeq even tried leveraging Iran's oil as a means of reducing some of the economic stress, seeking a loan from the US government to ease Iran's financial crisis. He was soon met by not only the denial for aid by the American government but eventually faced a boycott of Iranian oil as retribution for Mosaddeq and Iran's move to nationalize the oil fields. During his years as Prime Minister, Mosaddeq was painted as a "dangerous fanatic"<sup>10</sup> because of his distrust of foreign powers and for putting Iran's best interests at heart. In 1953, Mosaddeq was removed from office in a CIA-assisted coup, marking the second time a Pahlavi Shah would come to power by removing someone else from office.

It wasn't long after Mohammed Shah came to power that he received the exact loan Mosaddeq had gone to Washington asking for. Two decades later, President Nixon would end up selling billions of dollars worth of military equipment to Iran because of how he saw the "Shah as the policemen of the gulf."<sup>11</sup> Besides for maintaining his power with the aid of the West's military loans as a means of rising to power, the Shah, like his father, made an attempt at modernizing Iran's economy and social life. From the outside, the late 1960's and early 1970's looked like an economic success, but underneath there was a significant favoring of mechanized farming<sup>12</sup> and "preferential policies toward Western-style industries,"<sup>13</sup> for example, in industries like agriculture. While this wasn't the only way Iran was negatively impacted by the Shah's political and economic policies, it does demonstrate a larger theme of putting the West before

---

<sup>9</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 126.

<sup>11</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 163.

<sup>12</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 161.

Iranians. As a result, there was the repetition of modernization outpacing any possible improvements in Iranian society. For example, with the case of Iranian farmers, there would be a move into cities and urban areas without adequate resources and jobs, further perpetuating economic and social hardships. Like his father, Reza Shah, Mohammed Shah also attempted to enforce a one-size fits all model of feminism, which would only lead to further backlash from religious groups and an association of some cases of improved conditions for women with the toxic and abusive West.

Because of their perceived success under the Shah and their supposed allegiances to the West, religious minorities would also face significant backlash after the Revolution. Most of the time, the Shah was simply trying to leverage women and religious minorities for political gain. This can especially be seen in the Shah's "reversal in official attitudes toward Zoroastrians — from being an impoverished minority, they became embodiments of the virtues of ancient Iran,"<sup>14</sup> in order to strengthen the public image of the power of the Pahlavi dynasty. Brandishing the Pahlavi Dynasty also came in the form of the extravagantly tone-deaf celebration marking the 2500th year celebration of the Persian monarchy, an anniversary that we know to be a fabrication.

Eventually the shaky foundation that was the Shah's reign would come tumbling down because of his strong involvement with the West in addition to his severe human rights violations. Persis Karim explains that:

The Iranian government sought to control newspapers and writers, particularly those with leftist and Marxist tendencies. Many Iranian writers' works were suppressed and they were intimidated, arrested, tortured, or killed at the hands of the SAVAK, Iran's state

---

<sup>14</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 103.

security police, which intervened regularly to regulate and stifle Iran's fledgling book industry.<sup>15</sup>

This account of the strict and violent repercussions against writers with opposing political views goes to show how deeply rooted the Shah's pervasive fears of political dissidence was within his regime, given that he would go to such lengths to silence his perceived enemies' views. These policies led to the Shah being known as a paranoid leader, which only got worse after his cancer diagnosis in which his wife, Farah Pahlavi, was tasked with being the public face of the monarchy. An effect of this paranoia was the Shah's severe punishment and torture of political dissidents as referenced above, including one of the authors of one my primary sources of interest. Eventually, the Shah's severe repression would catch up to him, so much so that he faced hostile demonstrations both at home and abroad. Eventually, a coalition of religious, intellectual, and economic groups would come together to overthrow the Shah, who in the time when he needed them the most, did not have the US to back him up.

As the Shah's rule came tumbling down, Ayatollah Khomeini would rise to the position of being Iran's supreme leader. Many of the Iranians who protested in favor of removing the Shah severely underestimated Khomeini's ability to gain popular support and control. When he did gain power, he was quick to "[hand] vast political, economic, and cultural powers to his fellow Shia Muslim clerics."<sup>16</sup> The Ayatollahs who took his place would end up making the Shah look like an amateur in terms of human rights violations and repression. Women and religious minorities, for example, were some of the most severely persecuted groups because of perceived

---

<sup>15</sup> Persis Karim, "Writing Beyond Iran: Reinvention and the Exilic Iranian Writer," *World Literature Today*, 89 no.2 (2015): 35.

<sup>16</sup> Misagh Parsa, "Authoritarian Survival: Iran's Republic of Repression," *Journal of Democracy*, 31, no. 3 (2020): 55.

ties to the West. The Jewish community especially was targeted once anti-Zionism was established as a key pillar of the new Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. The Ayatollahs were then able to exploit the pre-existing societal divide in Iran exacerbated by decades of Western interference in Iranian society. In turn, the Ayatollahs have prevented meaningful political, economic, and social change and inflicted an additional 30 years of ongoing trauma on the Iranian people.

### *Trauma Theory for Reading Literature about Twentieth Century Iran*

This historical context now comes in handy for approaching trauma literature about twentieth century Iran from a more informed and ethical point of view in terms of combating pre-existing biases using historical fact. Applying a trauma lens to the three books I have chosen as my primary sources enables a simultaneous unpacking of the traumatic content in the texts and an analysis of how different authors' style, structure, and methods contribute to the texts status as a trauma literature. To understand how trauma manifests within an author's writing, audiences can look to the poetry of Audre Lorde. In her work, Lorde renegotiates the layers of her experiences of being a black, LGBT woman by challenging normative uses of language through " 'trauma' aesthetics' " and also through her "disruption of traditional syntax and grammar."<sup>17</sup> By defying hegemonic writing standards, Lorde demonstrates a parallel in how language can mimic the shattering of self and world by trauma. Narrative jumps between different characters' points of view and in literary time is another means of reflecting trauma in literary techniques. These jumps can "[illuminate] the process of coming to terms with the

---

<sup>17</sup> Megan Obourn, "Audre Lorde: Trauma Theory and Liberal Multiculturalism," *Melus*, 30, no.3 (2005): 220.

dynamics of memory that inform new perceptions of the self and world,”<sup>18</sup> referencing the dramatic upheaval of one’s former life in the wake of trauma.

Shifts in narrative point of view, time, and even place is one of the key literary techniques used by one of my primary texts of focus, *The Saffron Kitchen*, to demonstrate the “cognitive chaos and possible division of consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> Using this narrative style, *The Saffron Kitchen* tells the story of Maryam and Sara, mother and daughter living in contemporary London. Following a series of traumatic events within their family, Maryam decides to travel back to Iran, a journey which coincides with Maryam being transported back into the memories of her childhood in 1950’s Iran. In an attempt to bring Maryam back to her English husband and Sara’s father, her daughter Sara also crosses borders in hopes of finding her mother. On their respective emotional and physical journeys, both mother and daughter are forced to reckon with decades of unprocessed trauma stemming from Maryam’s estrangement from her family that was shadowed by the overthrow of the Mosaddeq. Maryam and Sara’s story not only gives a face to the experience of generational trauma but enables audiences to access one of the foundational moments for the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. In return, audiences are given a missing piece of the puzzle in terms of making sense of why the 1979 Revolution was the breaking point for Iranian society.

My next primary text, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, similarly makes use of literary jumps between different characters to demonstrate the contagious effect of trauma on members of a nuclear family. The protagonists in *The Septembers of Shiraz* are a Jewish family living in Iran after the 1979 Revolution. This family’s trauma stems from their status as a religious minority,

---

<sup>18</sup> Balev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 150.

<sup>19</sup> Balev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” 150.

specifically one deemed enemies of an intensely anti-Zionist state. While the novel primarily revolves around the family's trauma of their father and husband, Isaac, being arrested for supposed ties to Israel, the experiences of the other characters, primarily his wife, provide a rich literary source for unpacking the layered experience of religious minorities after the Revolution.

While *Septembers of Shiraz* is a fictional text based on a family's experiences with incarceration after the Revolution, Shahrnush Parsipur's memoir, *Kissing the Sword*, provides a painfully objective, first-hand account of life inside the woman's block of an Iranian Prison under the Ayatollahs. *Kissing the Sword* is unlike my other texts in that it is the only work of non-fiction and also the only text written by an Iranian author. These factors, combined with Parsipur's agonizingly vivid writing style, create a reading experience that illuminates just how difficult it is to make black and white assertions about the experience of trauma. Parsipur explores multiple threads of carceral trauma through her surreal depictions of psychological dynamics within the prison simultaneously blurring the line between her own trauma and the trauma she witnesses her fellow inmates' experience. As a result, Parsipur creates a text that is constantly negotiating the boundary between individual versus collective experiences of trauma that in the end is one of my work's overarching goals: how to piece together individual experiences of the trauma of the 1979 Revolution within a greater framework of shared Iranian political, socioeconomic, gendered, and cultural trauma that each of my primary sources establishes as being around from far before the 1979 Revolution.

## Chapter 1: Gender and 1950's Iran: Tracing Iranian Generational Trauma

When studying significant historical events, one of the most crucial first steps is to take a step back and analyze what was happening before the event took place that would set into motion such monumental change. This is an intellectual mindset that can be applied to learning about history through literature as seen in Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen*. This novel checks this box by providing the opportunity to analyze literature about the 1979 Revolution by actually writing about Iran's history in the tumultuous decades before the Revolution. These preceding decades can then be understood as laying the groundwork for such a lasting and influential moment in Iranian history like the Revolution. *The Saffron Kitchen* tells the story of Maryam and Sara, mother and daughter, living in contemporary London. Maryam is originally from Iran, and Sara is her daughter with her English husband Edward. The novel's chapters alternate between the two characters' perspectives. In Maryam's chapters, there is the added layer of travelling through time into her memories from 1950's Iran when she was just a teenager. Maryam's journey back in time and back to Iran, parallel the physical journey she takes back to Iran in present time after Sara suffers a miscarriage, which sends Maryam into an emotional downward spiral after she is consumed by the guilt of feeling she has caused Sara's miscarriage.

The circumstances around Sara's miscarriage include one of the other key characters of the novel – Saeed. Saeed is Sara's cousin and Maryam's nephew, the son of her youngest sister Mara. Saeed comes to live with Maryam and her husband, Edward, from Iran after Saeed's father quickly remarries after Mara's death from cancer. Saeed's upheaval in the wake of a tragedy not only impacts his own individual emotional state, but it also sets off a chain reaction of traumatic events for both Sara and Maryam. Upon his arrival in England, Saeed has an understandably difficult time adjusting to life in a new country, especially in school. Maryam also takes Saeed's

arrival hard given how he reminds her of the loss of her sister, and the two end up butting heads often. This tense dynamic reaches a climax on the day Sara suffers a miscarriage as a result of attempting to keep Saeed from jumping off a bridge after he has a tense argument with her mother.

The emotional trauma Saeed brings with him to England from his mother's death and abandonment from his father functions as the fuel and Sara's miscarriage lights the match that sends Maryam into a guilt-ridden spiral back in time and back to Iran. Readers are transported along with her as she remembers the circumstances that would lead to her becoming estranged from her father and her country. Notably, Maryam's already emotionally difficult teenage years took place with political upheaval playing in the background as Prime Minister Mosaddeq was overthrown. By using two characters who are mother and daughter to create a narrative that includes descriptive narrative details about the condition of women's lives before the 1979 Revolution, Crowther is able to illuminate the generational implications and longstanding nature of gendered trauma in a way that asserts that shared Iranian trauma did not begin with the 1979 Revolution. In her use of language, Crowther is also able to create a metaphorical relationship between the maltreatment of women and Iran's relationship with the West. Crowther then demonstrates how one individual's series of traumatic experiences can help to initialize unpacking an entire country's shared trauma that might come across as "untouchable." Finally, by including poetry as a form of coping for the novel's characters, Crowther reinforces the sense of connection between individual Iranian's trauma by further opening doors for understanding the overlap in individuals' experiences that become part of a whole.

### *Inherited Gendered Trauma*

One of the crucial literary techniques Crowther employs is creating a fragmentary text in how the novel jumps between not only Maryam and Sara's points of view but also time and place, formulating an understanding of trauma as a living and shareable entity. This stylistic choice is jump started from the first chapter when the narrative begins with Sara's memory of suffering the trauma of a miscarriage while attempting to save her cousin, Saeed's life. While it is Sara and her husband who suffer the trauma of losing their unborn child, it is a trauma that sends aftershocks through the family and most notably into her relationship to her mother. Sara's miscarriage is an important moment in the plot to analyze not only because of how it sets off a chain of narrative events that instigate the plot of the novel and switches in literary point of view, negotiating between individual and shared reactions to trauma. On one hand there is Sara's extremely personal trauma that she experiences given how visceral the experience of miscarriage is on the woman carrying the child because of the "considerable social and psychological investment ... made in the pregnancy."<sup>20</sup> In terms of claim to the trauma, this makes Sara even closer to the epicenter of the trauma than even her husband who was the father of the child. This then adds a gendered layer to the experience of miscarriage because of the biological connection between mother and child, and the physical trauma the female body undergoes when losing a child.

The trauma of Sara's miscarriage, however, is not limited to her own intimate experience of loss, but also sets off a chain reaction that unearths her mother's pre-existing guilt with the repetition of feeling as if she has caused the loss of another mother's child. In the novel, Maryam

---

<sup>20</sup> Jenny Littlewood, "From the Invisibility of Miscarriage to an Attribution of Life," *Anthropology and Medicine* 6, no. 2 (1999): 219.

is carried away by the tidal wave that is her daughter's pain back into her own deeply traumatic memories as a young woman in Iran. Maryam is transported back into her memories when her family's housekeeper and caretaker, Fatima, loses her baby boy. Even as a young child, Maryam absorbed the pain and guilt of this loss since as an infant she was nursed by Fatima when her mother was unable. While her father attempts to console her by telling Maryam that Fatima's son "had been born weak anyway," Maryam reflexively says that she knows "that is not true. I killed him before I could walk. It was the first thing I did in my life."<sup>21</sup> To take on such immense responsibility and guilt for the loss of another mother's child is a heavy burden for anyone to take on, especially a young girl, given the immense societal expectation of women to become mothers and good ones at that.

Once Maryam's pre-existing sense of guilt becomes illuminated, it's easier to see how the guilt of feeling as if she caused Sara's miscarriage could set her off to, in other words, run away from her daughter in her time of need. Thinking again about Bjorn Krondorfer's definition of trauma as being "caused by a severe violation of integrity (often described as a shattering of self and the world),"<sup>22</sup> comes in handy when understanding Maryam's reaction to her daughter's trauma as well as gaining an appreciation for Crowther's stylistic choice of creating a fragmentary narrative. Using Krondorfer's definition, it becomes apparent that Sara's trauma not only shatters Maryam's self-perception of herself as a mother, but also the relationship with her own daughter. More generally, given the thematic content of generational gendered trauma within the text, it makes sense for the novel to be structured as a mother and daughter who are simply trying to put together the pieces of their shattered self and the world around them. While

---

<sup>21</sup>Yasmin Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, (Penguin Press, 2006), 47.

<sup>22</sup>Krondorfer, "Unsettling Empathy: Intercultural Dialogue in the Aftermath of Historical and Cultural Trauma," 91.

fragmentary novels can be difficult to keep track of, the disorienting effect it produces mimics the very real effect of trauma on multiple individuals at once in how “a severe violation of integrity” can break someone both physically and mentally. For the character of Maryam this violation of world and self takes on a compounding effect because of the cyclical nature of her unresolved guilt from the death of Fatima’s son that only comes back to harm her when it is her daughter who undergoes such a painful trauma that is so interconnected to the physical and emotional experience of gender.

### *Iran and the West: A Case Study in Toxic Marriages*

The novel develops a deep sense of sympathy for Maryam in how she experiences a deep-rooted guilt for the loss of another mother’s child not once but twice. This, however, is not the only form of gendered trauma Maryam carries with her. One of the memories Maryam revisits during the novel is when her father attempts to marry her off as a young teenager. Maryam in a moment of defiance refuses her father’s wishes to which she is met by “his spit on my face before he raised his hand and slapped me, my head jerking to the side.”<sup>23</sup> Yet again there is a cyclical quality in Maryam’s trauma given how she “slap[ed] [Saeed] so hard his head jerked to the side,”<sup>24</sup> during the tense altercation between the two that would eventually lead to Saeed attempting to take his life which results in Sara’s miscarriage. Although it is not explicitly written in the text, the way Maryam slaps her nephew can be seen as compounding her sense of guilt given in how it was once her who was on the receiving end of physical force from a close adult family member.

---

<sup>23</sup>Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 63.

<sup>24</sup>Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 13.

While Maryam's run in with child marriage was a destructive moment for her relationship with her father and later on with her nephew, Maryam can actually be considered one of the lucky ones when it comes to Iranian girls being married off as young girls. Maryam's father's wealth and her family's socioeconomic status protected her from being married off even younger. It wasn't until 1931 under the first Reza Shah that the legal age of marriage for girls was raised from 9 to 15,<sup>25</sup> so Maryam can actually be seen as privileged for not being married while she was still a young girl for the sake of her family's financial well-being. Even though there were significant legal improvement made, these changes were stunted by the fact that "in other areas of family law, such as polygamy, custody, inheritance and guardianship, the family remained intact and based on Islamic laws in favor of men,"<sup>26</sup> making it so that women less fortunate than characters like Maryam still faced living lives that were regulated by the decisions of others.

Raising the minimum age for marriage was not the only step Reza Shah attempted to take in the name of modernizing gender conditions. "In January 1936, Reza Shah issued a decree calling for the unveiling of all women, which was influenced by Atatürk and his secularist gender policies in Turkey."<sup>27</sup> This decree was what Reza Shah considered a step in the right direction towards advancing quality of life for women. It came after a slew of other positive changes like increased educational opportunities and legal rights. However, given how women were physically beaten if they wore a chador in public, the methodology behind improving women's lives was seriously flawed. The changes under the Shah relied on a heavily

---

<sup>25</sup>Marziyeh Bakhshizadeh, "Conceptualizing Gender, Religion and Islam," in *Changing Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*, (Verlag Barbara Budrich: 2018).

<sup>26</sup>Bakhshizadeh, "Conceptualizing Gender, Religion and Islam," 63.

<sup>27</sup>Bakhshizadeh, "Conceptualizing Gender, Religion and Islam," 63.

conceptualization of feminism based on Western standards of what advancing women's rights looked like. In such a religious country like Iran, this not only backfired because of the prevalence of religion but also because of pre-existing distrust of the West. As a result, the relationship between the West and this one-size-fits-all feminism Reza Shah tried imposing would create negative societal connotations when it would come to evaluating and improving a women's position in Iranian society down the line.

*The Saffron Kitchen* specifically depicts this type of one-size-fits-all feminism under Reza Shah using the character of Aunt Soraya, Maryam's father's sister. Maryam describes how her aunt only wore "long black chadors made of the lightest, softest materials" made from Parisian silk.<sup>28</sup> This seemingly minute detail about the clothes Aunt Soraya wears goes a long way in developing Aunt Soraya as an emblem of the Westernized-Iranian women in her taste for Western material clothes. While this sort of idealization of the West exists on a spectrum and there were other types of women who definitely bought into this ideology, Soraya's position is amplified by her socioeconomic status in a way that differentiates her from women who might be less likely to buy into these ideas because of how they and their families bore the brunt of Iranian economic concessions to the West. This relationship between socioeconomic status and modernization, especially in terms of dress, transcended gender as well in how "in some of the remote rural villages, the peasants were so poor they could not afford to buy the new European-style clothing ordered by the Shah. Instead, they would buy one suit of clothes for the entire village, and take turns using it when they ventured into town."<sup>29</sup> This excerpt illustrates just how vast the disconnect was between ruling families like the Pahlavis and Maryam's own family, in

---

<sup>28</sup>Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Chris Paine and Erica Schoenberger "Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954" *Merip Reports*, (1975).

comparison to the majority of Iranians when it came to attempting to modernize a country. This disparity is especially apparent in the rate of modernization in Iran that completely disregarded the practical considerations needed to actually improve the lives of those with less money, resources, and connections to the West.

Aunt Soraya is not just a noteworthy character because of how she embodies Westernized ideals of feminism, but also because of how she explains to Maryam the political environment of Iran in the 1950's. At the time that Maryam's father attempts to marry Maryam off, in effect transferring her economic burden onto another man, is when Iran as a country is going through a similar crisis of economic strife after getting the cold shoulder from its very own partner in a forced marriage, the US. WWII is a useful historical event for pinpointing when the unbalanced political and economic dynamic between Iran and the US began. Although Iran technically remained neutral in the conflict, that didn't stop both British and Russia troops from entering Iran in 1941 in response to Reza Shah's procrastination in expelling German troops from Iran.<sup>30</sup> Like with WWI, Iran bore the brunt of a war they weren't even directly involved in and there would be direct impacts on the economic conditions of its citizens. By 1942, "there were bread riots, owing to the acute grain shortage, aggravated by hoarding and speculation."<sup>31</sup> That year and continuing into 1943 American advisors would be sent into Iran and eventually "Americans were put in charge of all key economic departments."<sup>32</sup>

As Aunt Soraya tells Maryam almost a decade later, "We, Iran, you and I, are not strong. We cannot be alone in this world. We must choose one ally or another, one husband or another if we

---

<sup>30</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 105.

<sup>31</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 107.

<sup>32</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 107.

are to survive ... Iran has been made love to by London, Moscow, Washington.”<sup>33</sup> Aunt Soraya delivers this powerful line as a sort of consolation for explaining to Maryam why she must marry so young instead of pursuing her dream of being a nurse. Aunt Soraya’s equation of Iranian women’s relationship with men to Iran’s relationship with the West serves as a powerful metaphor for an internalization of dependence on men and the West. The relationship Aunt Soraya describes plays up learned gendered and political expectations for both women and the Middle East that establishes both Iran and women as entities that are unable to exist in the world on their own. For Iran after WWII, “American influence in Iran grew, and as the United States was largely responsible for stabilizing the postwar Iranian government, it was natural to turn to an American firm for development aid.”<sup>34</sup> As Nikki Keddie writes above, the US would take on a very definitive role as Iran’s economic savior, which they would eventually leverage to maintain control and gaslight leaders like Mosaddeq who strived for a more independent and autonomous Iran.

This metaphorical relationship between gender and political relationships that *The Saffron Kitchen* illustrates is still a complicated one to tease out because not all Iranians shared such pro-Western sentiments as Maryam’s father and his sister. As Keddie explains, WWII “brought new opportunities for profit to those in the middle and upper classes...but caused suffering to the popular classes and those on fixed incomes.”<sup>35</sup> This historical qualification then adds the added layer of economics to this already complicated metaphor that makes dissecting the overlap between gendered and political dynamics trickier to analyze given the disparate economic situations of Iranians during and after WWII.

---

<sup>33</sup>Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 67.

<sup>34</sup>Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 108.

### *The Despair of Sexual Trauma*

Returning to considering the historical figure of Prime Minister Mosaddeq, it is clear he was one of the individuals who attempted to make real and lasting changes in Iran. During the postwar oil crisis when Iran was grappling with objectively disparate oil agreements that were “particularly galling in light of more favorable oil agreements between American oil companies and other countries.”<sup>36</sup> Mosaddeq would be a leader that repeatedly tried to negotiate on the behalf of Iran but given his perceived status as “an anti-imperialist nationalist who intended to keep Iran from being controlled by an foreign country or company” the US refused to give Mosaddeq aid during the peak of post-war economic troubles and would eventually join forces with the Pahlavis to stage a coup.<sup>37</sup> From characters like Aunt Soraya’s perspective there were “rumors that there will be uprisings across the country. There are simmerings pockets of unrest wherever you turn; people are troubled and unhappy. The nationalization of the oil fields hasn’t changed their lives or set them free as they had hoped.”<sup>38</sup> Aunt Soraya’s synopsis of the political climate preceding Mosaddeq’s forced fall from power must clearly be taken with a grain of salt because of the family’s economic biases towards the West.

The backdrop of political upheaval is especially significant for Maryam’s accumulation of gendered trauma in *The Saffron Kitchen*. During the overthrow of Mosaddeq is when Maryam becomes separated from her pro-Pahlavi family and her only option is to take refuge with Ali, her childhood love interest and tutor. Because of the fact that Ali is of a significantly lower socioeconomic class and, most culturally relevant, the fact that they were unmarried in such a socially conservative country, both Ali and Maryam face harsh consequences after simply

---

<sup>36</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 123.

<sup>37</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 68.

spending the night together out of necessity. Once Maryam's father finds out, Ali is brutally beaten, and Maryam is disowned by her father and forced to undergo an invasive examination by a military doctor to ensure that she is still a virgin.

The fact that Maryam is so severely punished for spending a night with someone who she genuinely loves out of necessity, mimics how Mosaddeq is politically punished by the West for simply wanting the best for Iran and his constituents. Continuing with Maryam's own trauma of being sexually harmed by the military in the backdrop of political upheaval acts as an intersection point between a deeply intimate form of gendered trauma and a collective experience of political change and disruption. In response to her traumatic examination as just a young woman, Maryam remembers how "I closed my eyes and somehow knew that something in me was about to die...and I sent my mind somewhere else."<sup>39</sup> The way the novel performs a narrative jump, intentionally excluding the details of her trauma, mimics the way in which Maryam blacks out as a defense mechanism to the traumatic experience that she undergoes. As a result, there is a new literary space created for audiences to contemplate just how painful this instance of sexual exploitation must have been for someone who was only a teenager, especially at the hands of her own father.

Sexual trauma is an immensely difficult and heavy subject to analyze in literature, however, sometimes less turns out to be more when it comes to understanding and reckoning with such immense traumas. The way the novel leaves a gap in the narrative description of Maryam's trauma can then actually be seen as creating more room to at least interact with it, if not identify with and relate to the, the pain Maryam goes through. As Gabrielle Schwab writes, "it is often this silence in the interstices of language that breathes life into literature, endowing it

---

<sup>39</sup>Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 99.

with the ability to engage readers with the limits of what is sayable, namable if not knowable.”<sup>40</sup> This line from Schwab is extremely useful for understanding and accepting the limitations that come from analyzing trauma literature. It is true that part of the mission of trauma literature is to take down the barriers that prevent conversation around and healing from trauma, but as Schwab illuminates sometimes the best thing to do is acknowledge and exist in the literary silence in order to truly understand and acknowledge the intricacies of human experiences of trauma. In the case of *The Saffron Kitchen*, this mindset is especially useful given that not everyone will have intimate connections to conversations around gendered and political trauma, but by recognizing limitations walls are simultaneously broken down, “contribut[ing] to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Medicinal Poetry*

One of Maryam’s only sources of relief in coping with her trauma is holding onto her romantically charged relationship with Ali by reciting their favorite poem, “Dover Beach” to herself. Crowther even includes the last stanza of the poem as an epigraph to the beginning of the novel. The choice of poem for the two characters to share a special connection to is bittersweet given that Matthew Arnold wrote the poem on his honeymoon since it isn’t until decades later after years of not being able to be together that Maryam and Ali are reunited. Still, the poem does mimic the narrative progression of the characters given how Arnold writes of “The eternal note of sadness” and “of human misery” that persists since the time of the Greeks. These lines

---

<sup>40</sup>Gabrielle Schwab, “Voices of Silence: On Speaking from within the Void (A Response to Shahla Talebi),” *Critical Trauma Studies*, (2016).

<sup>41</sup>Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” *Studies in the Novel*, 40, no. ½ (2008): 2.

develop a sense of reckoning with the unshakable bad in the word. By the last stanza, Dover writes:

Ah, love, let us be true  
 To one another! for the world, which seems  
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
 So various, so beautiful, so new,  
 Hath really neither joy, nor piece, nor help for pain

The start of the final stanza hits a poetic nerve, as one can picture being written by a man on his honeymoon, and that for all the despair and anguish in the world it is the love of one's romantic partner that serves as a life raft in the tumultuous sea. For Maryam especially the messaging of this poem thematically parallels her own experiences with trauma. In the novel, Maryam undergoes trauma after trauma that spills over into the lives of those around her all while the country she was born and raised in undergoes its own disruption and hardships on a larger political and socioeconomic scale. Still, reciting this painfully romantic poem about lovers pulling each other through as "ignorant armies clash by night," like the ever enduring conflict between Iran and the West, audiences can't help but think this poem was written for Ali and Maryam.

Besides for content, Crowther's choice of poetry as the genre of writing that brings Maryam solace is a poignant choice because of the centrality of poetry to Iranian society. As Mammad Aidani explains, "Iranians come from a society where most people (literate and illiterate) can recite classical and modern Iranian poetry."<sup>42</sup> In a country of citizens that are so

---

<sup>42</sup>Mammad Aidani, "Iranian Poetic Testimonies of Revolution, Trauma and Displacement," *Australian Feminist Studies*, 26, no. 69 (2011):336.

politically, socially, and economically divided the way a shared love of poetry transcends these barriers to unity and change should not go unnoticed. It then seems as if poetry is one of the few cultural phenomena that remains untouched by imperial forces from the West. As the Persian author Shahriar Mandanipour elaborates, “after every occupation and plunder and pillage, the only thing left to the Iranian people has been its language.” And so, we find ourselves back to considering individual and collective experiences of Iranian trauma in the 20th century. Now, however, we are afforded the insight into the snowball effect that trauma from previous historical contexts can have on present day experiences, in both the context of a single family and scaled up to the context of an entire country. Playing with the scale of magnifying the implications of a singular trauma into a larger, collective trauma is a methodology I will continue to apply in my next chapter that focuses on the traumatic layers of the experience of religious minorities in twentieth century Iran.

## Chapter 2: Distinguishing Layers of Trauma in the Religious Minority Experience

In my previous chapter, the novel *The Saffron Kitchen* demonstrated gendered trauma's ability to be inherited down generations. Dalia Sofer's *The Septembers of Shiraz* illustrates a different form of transmitting trauma that functions by spreading through close familial relationships. The novel illustrates this form of transmission within the Amin family, a well off, Jewish family living in Tehran after the 1979 Revolution. The epicenter of the Amin family's trauma is the arrest and imprisonment of the family's patriarch, Isaac, for supposed ties to Israel that occurs in the first chapter of the text. The novel presents Isaac's imprisonment as a singular instance of targeting the Jewish community in Iran within a larger historical context that spans centuries and simply changes varieties of Iranian anti-Semitic rhetoric and policies. Isaac's arrest also functions as the core of the family's shared trauma that ultimately branches off into different family member's individualized experiences. Farnaz, Isaac's wife, is an especially significant character because of how she illuminates the contagious effects of incarceration that cross prison walls. Furthermore, her experiences as an emblem of a Western-influenced, Jewish-Iranian woman expose how gender becomes tied up in the class based and cultural tensions that had been bubbling in Iran for decades and that ultimately erupted during the 1979 Revolution. Piecing together these experiences of husband and wife, who are physically separated by incarceration, creates the opportunity to interrogate how different family members can be impacted by overarching political trauma in different ways based on personal values and experiences.

*Oscillations in the Iranian-Jewish Experience*

The first chapter of *The Saffron Kitchen* opens with Isaac's arrest and interrogation with regards to his family in Israel. After Isaac is grilled about his Israeli family members, he attempts to plead his case to his interrogator, " 'I have nothing to do with government affairs, neither here nor in any other country. I'm a businessman, who happens to be a Jew, that's all,' "43 he says. His interrogator responds, " 'It's not that simple. We're going to have to investigate' "44 exemplifying how under the Ayatollahs the act of having Israeli family members was grounds for criminal prosecution, torture, and financial exploitation, all of which Isaac experiences over the course of the novel. Contextually, it helps to understand the unique qualities of Iranian anti-Semitism, as the regime integrated anti-Zionist policies into all aspects of the Ayatollah's political program.<sup>45</sup> In his article on anti-Zionism in contemporary Iran, Meir Litvak explains that other Middle East nations who follow "the majority school of Sunni Islam could afford to be more generous towards minorities."<sup>46</sup> In the Middle East, Iran's Shi'ite majority occupies a minority position relative to Sunnis in the Middle East. This makes it so that anti-Jewish sentiments in Iran are amplified by the fact that Iran's Shi'ite population is already on the defensive from their minority position in relation to other Islamic countries in the region. The question of why the Revolutionary Guards were so adamant in their prosecution of the Jewish community after the Revolution illuminates how pre-existing themes of anti-Semitism took on a new urgency with the rise to power of the Ayatollahs.

---

<sup>43</sup>Dalia Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, (Harper Perennial:2007), 13.

<sup>44</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 13.

<sup>45</sup>Meir Litvak "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism," *Journal of Israeli History*, 25, no. 1, (2006).

<sup>46</sup>Litvak, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism," 269.

A particular scene in the novel helps explain the historical precedent for the treatment of Jews after the Revolution. In it, Isaac explains to his young daughter, Shirin:

The Jews have been in Iran for a long time — before the time of Cyrus even. And they lived happily here for centuries, until they were declared *najes* — impure ... They had to move into the *mahaleh*, a kind of ghetto ... By the time I was born the government liked the Jews again.<sup>47</sup>

The passage above presents the build-up in a back and forth of a series of historical conditions that contributed to the specific variation of anti-Semitism in Iran after the Revolution. First, the passage demonstrates the scale of the timeframe in which the history of Iranian Jews exists. By referencing Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire and symbol of Iranian culture dating back to the year 559 B.C., Sofer is establishing just how long Iranian Jews have been around through the simplified backstory Isaac provides his young daughter. Isaac describes the complicated historical continuity of Iranian Jewry when he points to the shifts between Iranian acceptance of Jews, to banishing them to isolated neighborhoods, and then back to acceptance again. "By the time I was born the government liked the Jews again," he concludes in a dry tone. Isaac's tone echoes the weariness that has accumulated over many centuries among the Iranian Jewish community which has had to deal with instability represented by back and forth policies regarding their societal acceptance. This line also seems to be making an implicit jab at the Pahlavi Dynasty, implying that their perceived positive treatment of the Jewish community was exaggerated and was more like a transactional decision.

---

<sup>47</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 166.

Historian Lior Sternfeld explains that Reza Shah's "fierce fight against the religious establishment in his attempt to establish a secular society ... brought relief to the Jews of Iran."<sup>48</sup> This sentiment often transforms into a blanket statement with regards to the Jewish community's political opinion on the Shah and his father. Sternfeld adds that while the Jewish community did have a few good years under Reza Shah, there were still notable setbacks for the Jewish community. For example, there was the move to close all Jewish schools during Reza Shah's attempt at restructuring and unifying Iranian schools and there were "periodical recurrences of anti-Jewish attacks" even if they "tended to be local and isolated."<sup>49</sup> Sternfeld supports a larger point that just because the Pahlavis were in favor of secularizing Iran, which carried with it respite for the Jewish community, anti-Semitism was not automatically removed from Iranian culture. Under his son, Mohammed Shah, the Jewish community grew to 80,000 with only 10% falling in the category of poverty with 80% making up the middle class and 10% falling under the category of wealthy.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the Shah's close relationship with Israel does not override the fact that "many Jews were adamant supporters of the Tudeh,"<sup>51</sup> the anti-Shah, leftist group. Sternfeld's research suggests that just because the Jewish community faced relative improvements under the Shah does not equate to unanimous and blind support of the Pahlavi Dynasty.

---

<sup>48</sup> Lior Sternfeld, "Reclaiming Their Past: Writing Jewish History in Iran During the Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and Early Revolutionary Periods," (2014): 20.

<sup>49</sup> Sternfeld, "Reclaiming Their Past: Writing Jewish History in Iran During the Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and Early Revolutionary Periods," 20.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Brenton Betts, "Religious Minorities in Iran, and Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran."

<sup>51</sup> Lior Sternfeld. "Jewish-Iranian Identities in the Pahlavi Era," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 46, no.3 (2014): 603.

In *The Septembers of Shiraz*, Farnaz and Isaac show how political disagreement over the Pahlavis could exist within a single, Jewish family. In a scene narrated from Farnaz's point of view she recalls how, while at the coronation of Mohammed Shah, Isaac criticizes the Royal Family by comparing them to Napoleon and Josephine. Farnaz remembers how "she was irritated with him, also, for shattering an illusion, for mocking what she secretly found enchanting."<sup>52</sup> Farnaz's memory demonstrates that even a family who was invited to such a monumental event in the Pahlavi dynasty could see through the extravagant visual fanfare that the Pahlavis used to create a highly manufactured image of themselves as ancient nobility. Even Farnaz herself recognizes the event as an illusion. She also seems to conclude that the perception of the years under the Shah as without fault was like pulling the curtain on the hardships faced by most Iranians, including members of religious minorities who were perceived as having it easy under the Shah.

### *The 1979 Revolution: Pulling the Curtain on Cultural and Class Tensions*

Dalia Sofer illustrates class and cultural tensions in Iran during the time before and after the Revolution by first portraying the Amin family as well-off and having a taste for various Western material luxuries. The Amins' taste for luxurious European goods, however, is mitigated by Isaac's arrest and its subsequent effects on the family. For example, one of Isaac's first observations when he is imprisoned is of the clothes another prisoner is wearing. Sofer writes:

Isaac looks at the man — the deep burgundy of his pajama pants, the sheen of his leather shoes — seamless, solid, perfect — hand-stitched no doubt in a dusty atelier in the

---

<sup>52</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 54.

outskirts of London or Milan. These accessories, hints of the life the man has left behind, makes Isaac pity him more.<sup>53</sup>

This initial observation by Isaac when he has just been thrown in prison is significant for multiple reasons. For one, the way he is able to instantly recognize the quality and assess where exactly this man's apparel came from implies that Isaac himself enjoyed the same material luxuries. Earlier in the scene, Isaac has just watched this man relieve himself out of desperation. For Isaac's mind to jump to the man's clothes as a way of gauging how abused and tortured this man has been shows how Isaac's value system and how he makes meaning of the world around him was biased by his Western tastes.

In the line about how "these accessories, hints of the life the man has left behind, makes Isaac pity him more," there are multiple layers for analysis. Not only has the trauma of incarceration disrupted and shattered the Amin family's previous way of interacting with the world around them, but there is also something noteworthy in how Isaac's initial shock from being thrown in prison manifests itself into noticing this man's clothes and making an instant connection to European luxury as a sort of disassociation from the traumatic situation he finds himself in. Following this train of thought, this moment of the text starkly illuminates how the luxuries the Amin family enjoyed because of their wealth and class have lost their value as the result of the forcible transfer of power that took place during the Revolution.

During Isaac's imprisonment, Farnaz experiences a similar reckoning with the worsening social conditions. Her experience is further complicated by the added intricacy of her gender. Sofer establishes Farnaz's coming to terms with the new social environment imposed by the Ayatollahs by describing how Farnaz puts on "navy slacks, a white turtleneck, and her long

---

<sup>53</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 8.

black coat — the new government-enforced uniform,”<sup>54</sup> on the first morning of Isaac's arrest. To Farnaz, this “new government-enforced uniform” is a negative change, a restriction on the clothes she can wear by an overtly religious regime. As restrictive as the new dress code is, it is not the first time women were told how to dress by the Iranian government. In the 1930s Reza Shah forcefully banned the wearing of headscarves as part of his effort to secularize Iran. While the rules enforced by each leader may look different in terms of how they manifest in the appearance of women, at their core they are still means of controlling women and how they must dress.

Sofer expands on the complexity of gender issues after the Revolution by elaborating Farnaz’s perception of her gender and perceived loss of femininity due to the Ayatollahs' new dress code. Sofer writes that:

Her shapeless reflection in the full-length mirror strips her of the one lure she had possessed before the days of the revolution, when a hip hugging skirt, a fitted cashmere sweater, and a red smile were enough to get an entire room of a house painted for free, or the most tender meat saved by the butcher.<sup>55</sup>

The passage above asserts Farnaz as a woman who felt very comfortable with her female sexuality. More interesting is the overlap of Farnaz’s specific flavor of feminine confidence and Westernized beauty and fashion standards in her description of the “hip hugging skirt, a fitted cashmere sweater, and a red smile” that Farnaz was able to play to her advantage. Farnaz’s relationship with her womanhood exposes two things about life for women in Iran. For one, Farnaz is able to flaunt her sexuality through the stylish clothes she wears afforded by her

---

<sup>54</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 25.

<sup>55</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 25.

economic status given how she can even afford cashmere. At the same time, even if all women had the same socioeconomic status as Farnaz, not all Iranian women would have necessarily wanted to dress like Farnaz, especially in a majority-Shi'ite country. While the type of femininity Farnaz buys into is not one size fits all, it still demonstrates the continuity of Iranian women, both religious and not, being forcibly told how to dress under two regimes with opposing images of an ideal Iranian woman.

One of the women who challenges Farnaz in her previously acceptable social and moral beliefs is the family's housekeeper, Habibeh. After the Revolution, alcohol became legally prohibited by the new regime. In a tense moment between Habibeh and Farnaz one can see how the legal move to outlaw alcohol in accordance with religious law trickles down into everyday social interactions between Iranians of different classes. In one scene Habibeh tells Farnaz:

'Now get up, khanoum. Get up. Go do what you have to do.' She stands for several seconds, then reaches out to the night table and takes the empty glass of cognac. 'This Farnaz-khanoum, will have to stop.'

'I take only one glass, Habibeh, you know that. It calms me down.'

'One glass or ten, makes no difference. Not only is it bad for you, it's illegal now.'<sup>56</sup>

This interaction illustrates a tense dynamic bubbling under the surface between the two women. Habibeh's harsh tone in this dialogue is noteworthy because of how it challenges the expected dynamic between employer and employee. Her ability to assert a sense of moral superiority over the woman who pays her salary demonstrates how the Revolution destroyed not only pre-existing Iranian political structures but social ones as well. Habibeh can then be seen as

---

<sup>56</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 25.

leveraging the collision of Iranian politics and religion to establish authority over a woman who at one point was protected by her economic status and class.

*The Septembers of Shiraz* further demonstrates how economic and cultural disparities led to a compounding of tensions between individual Iranians after the Revolution. In the novel this plays out in the betrayal by Habibeh's son, Morteza, who was also the office manager at Isaac's jewelry store before his arrest. When Farnaz visits Isaac's place of work she finds Morteza emptying the place out. Farnaz describes how "it isn't just the gems they are taking — it's radios and leather chairs and file cabinets and telephones."<sup>57</sup> The way Morteza confiscates everything in Isaac's office suggests he is evening the score for the Amins' economic success under the Shah. In response to Morteza's actions, Farnaz tells him that he and other employees "were all unemployed gypsies when Isaac hired them. He took them in, paid for their education, gave them salaries they probably didn't deserve."<sup>58</sup> While we can sympathize with Farnaz as she faces an extremely distressing personal situation, there is an undeniable layer of classism to her tone that complicates the idea of the Amins as the good guys and people like Habibeh and Morteza as the bad guys. Given how both sides took their turn with being the losing side politically, socially, and economically, it makes less sense to group either side as good or bad. Morteza continues that this conflict:

Isn't about one man. It's about a collection of men — men who turned their backs to injustice, men who profited from a corrupt government, men who built themselves villas and traveled whenever they pleased to places the likes of me have never heard of.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 161.

<sup>58</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 162.

<sup>59</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 163.

This excerpt particularly demonstrates just how stark the difference in quality of life was for many Iranians under the Pahlavis. So, while the Amins' trauma is located in the overthrow of the Pahlavis, people like Morteza and Habibeh can be simply seen as justifiably reacting to years of being overlooked by the previous regime. The discourse between Farnaz and Morteza makes it difficult to point fingers at either political side, but instead consider a greater collective trauma that affects Iranians of all walks of life that isn't necessarily caused by a certain political party but is more a result of bearing the brunt of colonial pressures for so long.

### *Incarceration as a Metaphor for Shared Iranian Trauma*

In returning to the initial trauma that set off the novel's exploration of social and political trauma in Iran, we can now view incarceration as a metaphor for this greater pain and suffering endured by the entire country over the course of the 20th century. Early in the novel during one of his interrogations, Isaac's interrogator, Moshen, "grabs Isaac's hand and turns it around, burning his palm with the cigarette, which he presses with a child's determination to crunch an insect."<sup>60</sup> The comparison between Moshen's use of violence to the juvenile determination with which children kill insects illustrates the violence as the sort of violence that lacks meaning and purpose. In its place is a reckless sort of violence with the only end goal of destruction and much like the violence inflicted on prisoners with the goal of crushing one's soul. Towards the end of the novel when Isaac is released and back home, one of the first things he tells Farnaz is that he cannot take baths because of the cigarette burns all over his body. Isaac's cigarette burns transforming into a long-lasting trauma that Isaac must cope with also works as a metaphor for

---

<sup>60</sup>Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, 62.

the continuity of collective trauma for Iranians both before and after the Revolution that was inflicted by higher powers with no regard for the lives of Iranians from the likes of Farnaz and Isaac to Habibeh and Morteza. Just as Farnaz could not help but be affected by her husband's arrest and the structure and luxuries of her life as she knew, everyday Iranians could not help but be affected by ongoing forms of political disruption and exploitation that were magnified by a variety of factors from being a religious minority to being working class. It is these differences that color individual's unique experiences of a group trauma, demonstrating how trauma can have divisive and varying effects on individuals within one family. In my next chapter, Shahrnush Parsipur's memoir *Kissing the Sword* will dig deeper into how incarceration can be seen as a lens for analyzing collective and individual forms of Iranian trauma during the twentieth century.

### Chapter 3: Dismantling the Binaries of Iranian Incarceration

Shahrnush Parsipur's memoir, *Kissing the Sword*, detailing her years spent inside an Iranian Prison after the Revolution is a rich literary source for exploring the trauma of incarceration in Iran during the twentieth century. Although the memoir details her time as a prisoner under the Ayatollahs after the 1979 Revolution, Parsipur also references her time in prison under the Shah before the Revolution. In her first experience with incarceration in Iran, Parsipur was arrested and imprisoned by the Shah's forces in response to her public denouncing of the Shah's arrest and execution of artists and writers with opposing political views. In between her arrests, Parsipur moved to Paris after her first arrest because of what she describes as "the suffocating environment that engulfed the country." Four years later in 1980, Parsipur returned to her family and home country just as the Iran-Iraq War broke out. By 1981, Parsipur was arrested and joined her own mother in prison after the two were accused of being political dissidents by the Ayatollahs because of written material implicating support for rival political groups

When she is arrested and taken to Evin Prison, Parsipur joins her own mothers and a collection of women, most of whom were only teenagers or in their early twenties, who were also incarcerated at that time. The female prisoners she meets all bring unique backstories to the prison that is now their home, but still each is linked by the communal experience of being incarcerated under the new Iranian regime. Parsipur is then able to convert these variety of experiences into a narrative that blurs the lines between the Iranian carceral state before and after the Revolution. By blurring these temporal lines, Parsipur in turn makes it difficult to hold one political regime as accountable over the other, given how she demonstrates that both the Shah and the Ayatollahs used incarceration and torture as a means of political repression. Parsipur

further obscures the concept of accountability by illustrating the reciprocal dynamic between prisoners and guards causing harm to each other. This paints a picture of the trauma of incarceration as an unavoidable contagion for anyone who comes into contact with the system. Furthermore, the way all the players within the carceral state are unable to be unaffected by the constant pain and suffering, they are also unable to prevent external social conditions such as gendered hierarchies from seeping into the prison walls. By examining the grey space between these binary concepts that are used to make sense of the experience of incarceration, Parsipur's writing shows just how impossible it is to place the concept of trauma in a neatly packaged box.

### *Blurring Temporal Lines Within the Twentieth Century Iranian Carceral State*

Given that Parsipur was imprisoned by both the Shah's SAVAK and the Ayatollahs, her memoir includes memories about her first time being incarcerated under the Shah hence illuminating how difficult it is to locate the epicenter of Iranian trauma given its overlapping reign during changing political regimes. Upon her arrest, Parsipur writes how "they took me to Evin Prison, the infamous prison built during the reign of the shah and operated by his feared secret police, the SAVAK." Before inserting her own experiences, Parsipur provides this significant historical detail, which illuminates how the physical infrastructure where torture was being inflicted survived and maintained its purpose even if who was inflicting the state torture changed. The way Parsipur introduces the SAVAK as the perpetrators of the Shah's carceral state further shows how the trauma of Iranian incarceration wasn't a byproduct of the Ayatollahs coming to power. Instead, there was more of a changing of the guard in terms of who was doing the torturing as opposed to incarceration being a brand new trauma. This further demonstrates that torture and incarceration were not unique to either political side and that such opposing groups actually carried out similar acts of in state violence in the same physical spaces.

Parsipur's details about the physical spaces of Evin and Ghezel-Hessar Prison are important for illuminating a continuity in the practice of incarceration. When she first enters her unit at Evin Prison, Parsipur describes how "throughout the Shah's era, this section that now housed women political prisoners had served as the infirmary, which is why it was comparatively spacious." While the specific functions of the rooms in the prison shifted as a result of power changing hands, the prison's four walls did not change in their function: holding political dissidents captive. Again, the fact that two political groups who were at complete odds with each other used the same building to carry out the same human rights violations shows how neither side can receive exclusive blame for Iranian trauma over the years. The fact that there isn't someone to exclusively blame for decades of ongoing torture in Iran because both sides were doing it further complicates finding the root of historical and ongoing Iranian trauma. Given that both sides were perpetrators of torture, it is unfair to make the assertion that one side was worse than the other. Instead, the entity of Iranian carceral trauma becomes more difficult to unpack given that there were Iranians who were tortured under the Shah, the Ayatollahs, or even both.

Parsipur, herself, is one of the individuals who was incarcerated by both regimes. She explains how:

I had been arrested once before, in 1976 during the reign of the Shah, and spent fifty-four days in solitary confinement for having resigned from my job as a producer at the National Iranian Radio and Television in protests of the arrest and execution of several artists and writers.

Again, Parsipur presents a passage that depicts a continuity in tactics between two seemingly opposite political groups. For all their differences, the persistence of incarceration as a tool of

repression illuminates the overlap between the two governments in punishing dissenting Iranians. The two governments then seem to be more and more alike in their methods of repressing those with ideas that run contrary to their political programs. This similarity again illustrates how long free speech has been absent from Iranian society, even going as far back as the days of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905. Yet again, there is an obvious blurring of temporal lines that makes it impossible to complete the statement “Iran is traumatized because of x starting in y.”

In *Kissing the Sword*, Parsipur is not the only individual who represents the persistence of the Iranian carceral state across changing political regimes. The warden of Ghezel-Hesar Prison, Haji Davoud, was himself employed by both the Shah and the Ayatollahs. Parsipur is informed by her fellow inmates “that during the shah’s reign, Haji had been a cook at the Ghezel-Hesar and was only made a warden after the revolution.” Haji Davoud’s promotion from cook to warden shows that it wasn’t just the physical infrastructure that continued to be used after the revolution, but also the manpower. As a cook, Haji Davoud performed a more indirect role in the state’s system of incarceration, but nevertheless he was still a component of the system. His promotion to warden, however, represents another important moment of lines of trauma being obscured. Haji Davoud’s promotion after the Revolution shows how an individual can change positions within a power hierarchy merely by luck. At this point, the text has blurred the lines between the trauma of incarceration before and after the Revolution since it is impossible to point a finger at which government was worse or which “committed worse human rights violations.” The character of Haji Davoud now opens the door for demonstrating how the mental and physical environment of prison can blur the seemingly arbitrary power hierarchies within prisons that distinguish the “tortured” from to the “torturer.”

*Who's to Blame? Difficulties in Distinguishing the Tortured from the Torturer*

In the grey space of the “torturer” versus “tortured” categories exists a third category: the *tavvābs*. Parsipur introduces this group as:

Members of different political groups who had confessed to all manner of actions and deeds and had promised to cooperate with the authorities. In exchange, they were granted certain liberties and worked as guards in the units where they were being held. The *tavvābs* were generally cruel and ruthless and were feared and despised by the prisoners.

Parsipur’s description of the *tavvābs* illustrates how these individuals who occupied a space of quasi-guard, quasi prisoner were used as a mechanism of the state to enforce the demands of those at the top. The way Parsipur equates the *tavvābs* as “cruel and ruthless” has a two-way effect on those in the prison. On one hand the *tavvābs*’ cruelty served as a means of enforcing the harsh and debilitating psychological environment of the prison. At any moment, the *tavvābs* could expose any minor misstep by an inmate that could result in at the least a severe physical beating. In these instances, death was never off the table for the countless offenses that could be deemed a crime within the prison from the likes of writing a poem to even not wearing socks. As a result, inmates were constantly on edge from the unrelenting surveillance and threat of punishment at any turn. Nassrin Parvaz, another Iranian author who detailed her time in an Iranian Prison after the Revolution, reiterates this role of the *tavvābs* in how they were “in effect a fifth column.” Parvaz’s depiction again illuminates a consistency in how torture was carried out in Iranian prisons as two authors provide almost the complimentary accounts of how “the pressure of turncoat prisoners sowed seeds of distrust, mitigating against the natural solidarity of women in prison,” contributed to a never-ending mental turmoil.

While the *tavvābs* were instruments of state-inflicted physical and non-physical violence, there is also a line of analysis that leads in the direction of understanding how someone could occupy such a toxic and harmful position within a larger power structure. Parsipur stipulates that “fear had created monsters willing to do anything and go against any principal to survive. I hated them but I also pitied them.” In the first sentence, Parsipur illustrates a psychological hypothesis with regards to how someone who is imprisoned themselves could be exploited by the state as a means of harming those around them who occupy practically the same status. By constantly imposing a state of fear and apprehension, the state was able to use the toxicity of the mental environment of the prison to break even just a few inmates in order to exploit them in hopes of maintaining the state’s unrelenting power. In the process of designating certain prisoners *tavvābs*, the *tavvābs* become even more feared than the guards because they are both guard and prisoner. As explained above, the way *tavvābs* contributed to a constant state of unease given that they live in the same quarters as the inmates compounds the harm they can inflict because inmates are forced to live with them night and day. As “cruel and ruthless” as the *tavvābs* are, Parsipur is still able to uncover a sense of sympathy through her ability to look past all they’ve done and understand that their actions are more reflective of their shared conditions than their individual personalities.

One of the ways Parsipur is able to analyze the contagious relationship between the state and the *tavvābs* is through the character of Pari. Pari fits into the *tavvāb* mold in how she was “a bully” and she “harassed everyone for no reason.” Parsipur, however, digs deeper into Pari’s story and explains how she was “an opium addict and a smuggler ... [was] arrested because monarchist fliers were discovered stuffed between the cartons of Winston cigarettes she was peddling” even though in reality “she didn’t belong to any political group.” The circumstances

around Pari's arrest demonstrate how arbitrary the system of arresting individuals is. In this way, Pari and Parsipur's mother actually have something in common in that Parsipur's mother was arrested, put on trial, and imprisoned for having Mujahedin flyers that didn't even belong to her in her trunk. The arbitrariness of these two arrests shows how the circumstances around incarceration could simply be a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why tadvābs were able to inflict such pain and suffering, however, is not a result of arbitrary conditions. Parsipur again equates fear with the gasoline that is tossed on the fire of inflicting pain and suffering on others.

Parsipur illustrates how fear drives the tadvābs using Pari and her relationship with another tadvāb, Feri. Parsipur at one point realizes the two "were having intimate relationships." The nature of the two women's relationships shows how even when occupying the space of enforcing the moral and religious demands of the state, tadvābs could be just as guilty of committing prohibited offenses. The fact that the two women were committing such a serious crime in the Islamic community shows just how inaccurate it is to equate the categories of guard to someone who themselves follows the state's demands. Instead, Parsipur writes that it was "fear, an unspeakable fear, [that] was driving them to torment others." This line specifically shows just how pervasive fear was in this system of incarceration. It was a fear that was constantly underlying and propping up the whole system of fuzzy power dynamics between prisoners, tadvābs, and even the guards. In turn, Parsipur illustrates a vicious cycle of fear between groups that was designed to keep everyone in their place while the state maintained supreme control while feigning a sense of autonomy in the guards and tadvābs.

Parsipur's depiction of the dynamics between the guards and the tadvābs goes even further to show just how hazy the hierarchies between inmates and their captors were. In one

particularly startling line, Parsipur writes how “Haji Davoud feared the tadvābs as much as they feared him, and this was creating an increasingly stifling atmosphere.” Yet again, Parsipur is putting forth the idea that it was not just physical torture but the psychological and mental environment that led to a compounding of trauma within the prison. The fact that even Haji Davoud was not immune to the terror imposed by the tadvābs shows how lines of pain and suffering could travel in both directions within the prison. In another scene Parsipur explains further where Haji Davoud’s fear comes from. In the text there is a time where one of the tadvābs tells Haji Davoud of an inmate writing a pro-Mujahedin poem, Haji Davoud feels “afraid that if he didn’t punish them, the tadvābs would report him to higher authorities.” In this scene, it becomes apparent that tadvābs were not only put in place to surveil fellow prisoners. They also appear to be a means of regulating how the guards enforce the state-imposed rules. This dynamic between tadvābs and guards further tangles the lines between those inflicting the trauma and those receiving it because, in the end, there doesn’t appear to be any group who is left unharmed by the trauma of incarceration.

### *Shared Memories of Iranian Incarceration*

Given that prisoners, guards, and tadvābs were all impacted by the trauma of incarceration, Parsipur’s writing further establishes how individual experiences of trauma from members of these groups create a mosaic of collective traumatic experiences. One of the telltale signs of being tortured in Iranian prisons is the images of swollen and discolored feet from brutal lashings. Parsipur describes how prisoners “would often wear very large slippers instead of their shoes, because most often their feet would be whipped.” Parsipur noticing this pattern of behavior is important exactly because it is a pattern. The prisoners learned behavior of wearing

slippers demonstrates how the individuals adapted to repeated instances of physical abuse by knowing what was coming to them each time they were “taken from the unit to be interrogated.” Later on Parsipur writes that “by the end of September, the number of prisoners who could no longer walk had soared. Their feet were swollen to the size of oranges.” Besides for illustrating the graphic nature of the violence used against prisoners, this line demonstrates how the trauma inflicted on a singular body leads it to becoming a part of a group of tortured bodies. By writing “the numbers of prisoners who could no longer walk had soared,” Parsipur blurs the line between individual and collective trauma in how the pain and suffering of the individual becomes lost within the greater collective trauma that is undefined quantitatively. The collective nature of Iranian carceral trauma is further established in how other texts affirm the shared experience of brutal lashings on the feet of prisoners. In *Septembers of Shiraz* from my previous chapter, swollen, blue and purple feet are one of the ways the character Isaac is able to tell that his fellow prisoners have been tortured. Nassrin Parvaz, another real female inmate like Parsipur, also affirms that there were inmates with “feet [that] were so swollen they do not fit into her slippers.” The affirmation of the shared experience of gruesome, swollen feet goes to show how Parsipur’s depictions of Iranian carceral trauma are just one of many literary depictions. In turn, Parsipur’s writing ends up negotiating its own position as a singular experience of trauma while also being a member of a collection of written accounts on torture within Iranian prisons.

### *Weaponizing Familial Relationships*

Another means of Parsipur negotiating individual versus collective experiences of trauma comes from her depictions of how the state would exploit familial relationships to emotionally break prisoners. Parsipur writes how “another group of prisoners lost loved ones. This time, the fifteen-year-old son of a woman in our unit was among those killed. She had four children and she lost three of them to the firing squads.” The experience of this unnamed inmate acts as a template for how countless prisoners were constantly forced to reckon with not only the loss of loved ones who were also incarcerated, but also the crippling fear of not knowing what had happened to your loved ones. In the latter case, inmates' sense of grief and loss was compounded by the anxiety of not knowing, creating yet another layer to the already mentally crippling environment of the prison. This moment in the text yet again illustrates how one individual's pain and suffering can be seen as just a generic shared experience on a machine belt of reproducing mass trauma.

Mother Mossana, one of the inmates Parsipur profiles, brings to life the experience of having one's children imprisoned in another unit where their fate is unknown. Parsipur describes her as a “poor woman [who] was constantly terrified that her child would be executed.” Parsipur explains that “Mother Mossana's fourteen-year-old daughter had been put in prison at the same time as her.” The incarceration of both mother and daughter demonstrates a two-fold form of punishment by the Iranian state. On one hand there is the disruption of the family structure when multiple members of the family are relocated behind prison walls. At the same time, as illustrated by Mother Mossana there is the constant, impending fear that not only could you be killed, but your child or family member could also be sent in front of the firing squad at any time. This dynamic illustrates the presence of a compounding trauma in how the individual

experience of constantly being prepared to die is exacerbated by the fear of one's child receiving the same fate. In turn, the carceral state is able to not only break a singular individual but also that individual's group support system. Parsipur herself is incarcerated alongside her mother, so again individual experiences are being established as just one piece of a collective trauma as both Parsipur and Mother Mossana are just a few of the examples of inmates whose familial relationships were used against them.

### *Viewing Prison Outside of the Carceral Bubble*

Mother Mossana is an interesting character not only because of how she brings to life the trauma of being incarcerated with one's child, but also how she shows just how foggy the lines between inside and outside the prison are. In addition to her fourteen-year-old daughter, "her son Ali had been arrested at the same time as she and her daughter, and that the other two boys had been taken into custody a month earlier." The arrests of more than one of Mother Mossana's children demonstrates just how pervasive and thorough the Revolutionary Guards were when it came to arresting not only suspected individuals but also their families. Yet again, we have a form of individual trauma functioning on a larger collective scale in how it wasn't just one member of the family who would be punished, and it wasn't just one family who had the same exact experiences as Mother Mossana's. Mother Mossana's fear from not knowing if her children were alive or dead is amalgamated by the fact that "she was illiterate ... and [unable] to find out if their names were on the list published in the newspaper." Here is a specific moment where a condition of one's life outside prison directly impacts their experience within.

Parsipur delves into the condition of Mother Mossana's illiteracy by explaining "she had been raised in a devout family that believed literacy corrupted girls." By raising the issue of

Mother Mossana's literacy, Parsipur demonstrates that life within prison does not exist within a bubble. Instead, she shows that even with the physical barrier of prison walls, the women bring with them the hardships they already possessed from their lives outside of prison. Furthermore, these women are forced to carry an even heavier burden within prison given the condition of their lives before prison, making yet again for a compounding of various traumas.

In comparing Mother Mossana's life inside and outside of the prison, Parsipur blurs yet another line regarding quality of life as a result of incarceration. Parsipur details the frequent and violent beating both Mother Mossana and her children received from her devoutly abusive husband. When Parsipur first introduces Mother Mossana in the text she "was unconscious from a beating." Given what Parsipur explains about the harsh and abusive nature of Mother Mossana's life outside of prison, there is less of a distinct line between the abuse within and outside of the prison because for Mother Mossana it was nothing new. Instead, the torture and beatings she received within the prison seem to signify another instance of the changing of guards in terms of who is inflicting the trauma. Mother Mossana's experience of both domestic and state-sanctioned abuse then illustrates how the gendered violence does not change across prison walls; it is just another instance of changing who was committing the violence.

Given the vast scale of individuals incarcerated in Iran during the 20th century, Shahrnush Parsipur's memoir *Kissing the Sword*, is just one example of many books that deal with the specifically Iranian variety of carceral trauma. Parsipur's memoir can then be seen as fitting within one of the features of the book which is to piece together individual traumas within a larger collective. Parsipur, herself, serves as an emblem of the blurred lines between the carceral state before and after the Revolution given how she was imprisoned by both the Shah and the Ayatollahs. Parsipur is able to use these experiences and her writing to place herself one

degree away from the trauma of the carceral state in order to analyze the constant give and take between prisoners and guards that keeps the whole system running. Still, the memoir enforces the idea that the system of incarceration is not actually able to be isolated from the outside world and vice versa, in turn contributing to a compounding and unrelenting infliction of trauma by the state.

## Epilogue

Over the course of this thesis, I have analyzed three different primary sources on Iran during the twentieth century with the intention of providing readers a new perspective on the centrality of the 1979 Revolution in terms of understandings about Iran. Each of my texts have brought a different entry point for analyzing variations in the Iranian experience. It is unfortunate that the common thread between each of these texts has been the sense of connection to a collective Iranian trauma. As illuminated by my historian of choice, Nikki Keddie, and my other secondary sources, this shared Iranian trauma did not begin in 1978 with the start of the Iranian Revolution. In conjunction with each other, my primary sources demonstrate a continuity of trauma before, during, and after the 1979 Revolution. Where there is continuity and persistence of shared Iranian trauma in these texts, there are also strikingly individual characters with their own experiences and interpretations of the upheaval and distress around them. It is this grey space between individual and shared experiences that pulls readers in, specifically readers like me who are members of the Iranian diaspora and who are able to explicitly list the commonalities and differences between ourselves and our families and the characters on the pages of these books.

Writing this thesis has been for me has been an exercise in acknowledging and shedding preconceived notions about Iran and the Revolution. Now, however, I hope to take my opportunity in sharing my personal connections to each of the texts I analyzed. *The Saffron Kitchen* was admittedly one of my favorite texts to read because of how I saw much I saw my grandmother in the text. Reading about Maryam who was a nurse, I couldn't help but think of my grandmother, who was a well-known female physician in Tehran. Although my grandmother

and Maryam were born around the same time, I also saw my grandmother take the shape of Aunt Soraya because of her many years of being an ardent supporter of the Shah.

When reading *The Saffron Kitchen*, I couldn't help but also see my own mom and me in the characters of Maryam and Sara. While Maryam was growing up during the overthrow of Mosaddeq, my mother was four years old when the Shah was overthrown. My mom grew up to the sound of Iraqi bombs being dropped on Tehran, bombs that were supplied by the US. Reading this text through the lens of literary trauma theory has been my way of realizing that my very own childhood fear of fireworks was a form of inherited trauma from my mom's years growing up during the Iran-Iraq war. From the outside I don't seem like the right candidate for a poster on generational trauma. I've led an immensely privileged, comfortable, and safe life. Nearly 7,000 miles away and 28 years since my mom left Iran, however, I can still feel the indirect effects of my mom growing up in a warzone and will carry it with me for the rest of my life.

While I was able to find a sense of solace in identifying with the experiences of the characters of my texts, I was further challenged by letting go of my own preconceived notions about the 1979 Revolution. Admittedly, I wrote quite a few sections of my thesis face to face with the framed photograph of my great-uncle meeting Mohammed Shah. Besides for this physical reminder of my family's allegiances to the Pahlavis, I carry with me what my mom has told me about my grandparent's heated arguments with regards to the Shah. Reading *The Septembers of Shiraz*, I could imagine my grandparents and their disagreements over the Shah and his policies playing out in Isaac and Farnaz's back and forth over the Pahlavis. This tension was so intense in my own family that my grandmother took my five-year-old mom to Germany and England after the Shah was overthrown because she was so distraught. At that same time,

my grandfather was becoming more and more involved in Iranian politics after the Revolution, as the political representative of the Zoroastrian community. My family's status as a religious minority further complicates my understanding of the Revolution given how Zoroastrians faced a severe turn for the worse in terms of the quality of life just like the Amin family in the novel.

My greatest moment of reckoning came after reading multiple secondary sources that exposed how life for the majority of Iranians had taken a turn for the worse far before the 1979 Revolution and much of it was at the hands of the Pahlavis. Reading about how Shahrnush Parsipur, an Iranian author I now hold in such high regard, was arrested by the Shah before the Revolution shattered my learned perception of the Shah as a champion of human rights. Still, I did find comfort in the similarities I found between Parsipur and my grandfather who still are both equally concerned with bettering Iran socially and politically.

I have been drawn to trauma theory as a means of analyzing literature because at the end of the day there is no one right answer. Trauma theory enables individual readers to be able to make sense of the pain and suffering of others by using our human instincts of sympathy and compassion instead of looking for a one size fits all band aid. For all the harm caused by trauma, there is the sense of autonomy in putting one's own trauma into words that others can then be interacted with and connected with readers who bring their own unique experiences to the texts. Writing this thesis has been a challenging mix of emotions given my own claim to the issue at hand, but by analyzing these texts I feel as if I have been able to verbalize not only threads of my individual experiences with the trauma of simply being an Iranian-American, and I hope to have done justice to other Iranians who like me are just one piece of a collective Iranian Trauma.

## Works Consulted

Aidani, Mammad. "Iranian Poetic Testimonies of Revolution, Trauma and Displacement."

*Australian Feminist Studies* 26, no. 69 (September 1, 2011): 335–47.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2011.606606>.

Afshari, Reza. Review of Religious Minorities in Iran. *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001):

1121-1133. <http://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2001.0044>.

Amar, Paul. "Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourses of 'Men in Crisis,' Industries of

Gender in Revolution." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (2011): 36–70.

Bakhshizadeh, Marziyeh. "Conceptualizing Gender, Religion and Islam." In *Changing Gender*

*Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*, 1st ed., 11–16. Verlag Barbara Budrich,

2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8xnfv0.3>.

Bakhshizadeh, Marziyeh. "Women's Rights in Iran and CEDAW: A Comparison." In *Changing*

*Gender Norms in Islam Between Reason and Revelation*, 1st ed., 61–100. Verlag Barbara

Budrich, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8xnfv0.6>.

Balev, Michelle. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical*

*Journal* 41, no. 2 (2008): 149–66.

Betts, Robert Brenton. "Religious Minorities in Iran, and Comprehensive History of the Jews of

Iran." *Middle East Policy*. [https://mepc.org/religious-minorities-iran-and-comprehensive-](https://mepc.org/religious-minorities-iran-and-comprehensive-history-jews-iran)

[history-jews-iran](https://mepc.org/religious-minorities-iran-and-comprehensive-history-jews-iran).

Craps, Stef and Gert Buelens. "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels." *Studies in the Novel*

40, no. 1/2 (2008): 1–12.

Crowther, Yasmin. *The Saffron Kitchen*. Penguin Books, 2006.

- Fayyaz, Sam, and Roozbeh Shirazi. "Good Iranian, Bad Iranian: Representations of Iran and Iranians in *Time* and *Newsweek* (1998–2009)." *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2012.740899>.
- Feher, Shoshanah. "Chapter 2: From the Rivers of Babylon to the Valleys of Los Angeles: The Exodus and Adaption of Iranian Jews." In *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, 71–87. Temple University Press, 1998.
- Golkar, Saeid. "Organization of the Oppressed or Organization for Oppressing: Analyzing the Role of the Basij Militia of Iran: Politics, Religion & Ideology." *Politics Religion and Identity* 13, no. 4 (n.d.): 455–71.
- "How the 1994 Crime Bill Fed the Mass Incarceration Crisis | American Civil Liberties Union." Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.aclu.org/blog/smart-justice/mass-incarceration/how-1994-crime-bill-fed-mass-incarceration-crisis>.
- Jahanbegloo, Ramin. "I Am Not a Spy. I Am a Philosopher." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 3, 2014. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/i-am-not-a-spy-i-am-a-philosopher/>.
- Karim, Persis. "Writing Beyond Iran: Reinvention and the Exilic Iranian Writer." *World Literature Today* 89, no. 2 (2015): 35–37.
- Krondorfer, Björn. "Unsettling Empathy: Intercultural Dialogue in the Aftermath of Historical and Cultural Trauma." In *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition*, edited by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, 1st ed., 90–112. A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory. Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvdf03jc.11>.
- Littlewood, Jenny. "From the Invisibility of Miscarriage to an Attribution of Life." *Anthropology & Medicine* 6, no. 2 (August 1999): 217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.1999.9964584>.

- Litvak, Meir. "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism." *Journal of Israeli History* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 267–84.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13531040500502874>.
- Mandanipour, Shahriar. "The Poet, His Cut-Off Head in His Hand, Went Singing Songs and Ghazals: Literature in Iran." *Words Without Borders*. Accessed October 8, 2020.  
<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-poet-his-cut-off-head-in-his-hand-went-singing-songs-and-ghazals-litera>.
- Marandi, Seyed Mohammad, and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari. "Iranian Studies in the United States and Constructions of Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Case Study." *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 2 (2014): 41–55.
- Marandi, Seyed Mohammed, and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari. "Representations of Post-Revolutionary Iran by Iranian-American Memoirists: Patterns of Access to the Media and Communicative Events." *ReOrient* 2, no. 2 (2017): 146. <https://doi.org/10.13169/reorient.2.2.0146>.
- Mirakhor, Leah. "After the Revolution to the War on Terror: Iranian Jewish American Literature in the United States." *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)* 35, no. 1 (2016): 52–76.
- Naghibi, Nima. "Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women's Autobiographies." *Radical History Review* 2009, no. 105 (January 1, 2009): 79–91.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2009-005>.
- Nasri, Farzeen. "Iranian Studies and the Iranian Revolution." Edited by Abdul-Hadi Hairi, Fred Halliday, Amin Saikal, and Robert Graham. *World Politics* 35, no. 4 (1983): 607–30.
- Obourn, Megan. "Audre Lorde: Trauma Theory and Liberal Multiculturalism." *MELUS* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 219–45.

Paine, Chris, and Erica Schoenberger. "Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954." *MERIP Reports*, no. 37 (1975): 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011252>.

. "Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954." *MERIP Reports*, no. 37 (1975): 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011252>.

Parsa, Misagh. "Authoritarian Survival: Iran's Republic of Repression." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 14, 2020): 54–68. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0045>.

Parsipur, Shahrnush. *Kissing the Sword: A Prison Memoir*. Translated by Sara Khalili. The Feminist Press, 2013.

Parvaz, Nasrin, and Maryam Namazie. "Beneath the Narcissus: A Woman's Experience of Iranian Prisons and Beyond." *Feminist Review*, no. 73 (2003): 71–85.

The Guardian. "Poem of the Week: Dover Beach," October 20, 2008.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/oct/20/dover-beach-matthew-arnold>.

Richard, Yann, and Nikki R. Keddie. *Modern Iran : Roots and Results of Revolution*. Updated ed. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006.

Schayegh, Cyrus. "'Seeing Like a State': An Essay on the Historiography of Modern Iran." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 1 (2010): 37–61.

Schwab, Gabrielle. *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. NYU Press, 2016

Sofer, Dalia. *The Septembers of Shiraz*. Harper Collins, 2007.

Sternfeld, Lior. "Jewish-Iranian Identities in the Pahlavi Era." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 602–5.

Talattof, Kamran. "Iranian Women's Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 531–58.