Cultural Trauma in Post-9/11 Fiction: Representing the Marginalization of Iranians in Diasporic Novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that post-9/11 narratives by writers of the Iranian diaspora assign a new meaning to 9/11 and reconstitute the identity of their ethnic collectivity around this event. We contend that Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of cultural trauma provides us with a practical framework for analyzing post-9/11 diasporic identities because Alexander views trauma as a social construct and posits that events cannot be considered traumatic regardless of the social sphere in which they unfold. Accordingly, cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity genuinely believe that their identity has changed in fundamental and irreversible ways, and they decide to express this change in their narratives. This paper posits that applying Alexander's theory to post-9/11 novels by Iranian expatriates enables us to account for the marginalized identity of Iranians after the 9/11 attacks. Ultimately, this study will highlight the ways through which novels like Siamack Baniameri's *The Iranican Dream* (2004), Marsha Mehran's *Pomegranate Soup* (2005), and Porochista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (2007) capture the communal grief and predicament of most Iranians as well as their bewildering limbo state of between and betwixt after migration, which can reveal the perennial troubles of immigration and integration in diasporic communities.

Keywords: cultural trauma, diaspora, 9/11 fiction, double-consciousness, Iranian diaspora

Iran and Iranians in the West

The present study intends to take a social constructivist approach to a paradigm-shifting event, that of 9/11, because we believe that through this lens, we can better understand most of the post-9/11 novels written by immigrant Iranian writers. Before we start delving into the novels selected for this study, it is imperative that we take some time to talk about the community of Iranian immigrants in the West.

Numerous factors contribute to the immigration of Iranians to the West; however, the first wave of immigration came with the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, which resulted in the mass migration of many Iranian families who decided to leave the country and continue their life elsewhere. As Persis M. Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh explain:

> The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was fueled in part by widespread discontent across all sectors of Iranian society and was coupled with the perception that US economic and political interests in Iran were undermining Iranian democracy and sovereignty. While pervasive demonstrations and mass strikes coalesced into a revolution aimed at curbing foreign and American influence in Iran, many Iranians sought refuge in the very country targeted in the infamous "Marg bar Amrika" ["Down with America"]. (7)

The seeds of the 1979 revolution in Iran had been planted twenty years earlier when the United States aided Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in his efforts to topple the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, to tighten the Shah's grip on the country and strengthen his monarchical rule. This coup d'état, which is known as 28 Mordad coup d'état, set in motion a series of events that ultimately created anti-American and anti-Western sentiments in the Iranian people, who believed that the Shah's close ties with America would lead to more reliance on the West in the coming years. Years later, it was Ayatollah Khomeini, a religious leader in the west of Iran, who used this anti-imperialist sentiment to unite both religious and secular people in his efforts to overthrow the Shah. As Payam Ghalehdar maintains in his book *The Origins of Overthrow*, the United States "did not initially view the Revolution as inherently anti-American and instead believed that the new regime would maintain friendly relations with the United States," but they soon realized that they had lost "an important US ally in the Middle East" (35).

Many Iranians truly believed that the Shah must go, and that the new regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini would restore the country to its great, independent status. There were, however, skeptical people who could not find a clear path forward

defined by the revolutionaries, or when they did find manifestos here and there, did not like the direction of the country because, as Mahshid Amirshahi has tried to portray throughout her semi-autobiographical work, *At Home*, they knew that the promises made by the revolutionaries could not be realized in a theocracy. Many Iranians who were working in American and British companies in Iran and many students who had chosen American universities to pursue their academic careers decided to either leave Iran for the United States or stay there and wait to see how the events in Iran would play out.

Even though the revolution was the main reason for such widespread immigration, there were other reasons, notably the Iran-Iraq war. This long war led to another wave of immigration in the 1980s. According to Persis Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh, "the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) fueled an even more urgent impetus to flee Iran," which meant that a growing number of Iranian nationals were motivated or forced to leave Iran during and after the War. They continue:

> Migrant Iranians settled across the world, and today Iranian communities of all sizes can be found in many nations. The US, however, has become host to the largest Iranian diaspora community because of its longstanding ties with Iran and the significant number of US-educated Iranians who have resided historically in North America. It is difficult to establish precise figures for the Iranian American population, but "estimates have ranged from 'over one million' in the United States to 'four million or so' worldwide" (Malek 357). (7)

These immigrants had to face many hurdles in their efforts to find a new home. Thus, one of the main issues that Iranian writers strive to point out is how Iranian immigrants had to deal with populations in the host countries which had almost no knowledge of Iran. Consequently, problematizing the extent of knowledge that Westerners have about Iran becomes a recurrent motif in Iranian fiction written abroad. Another critical experience these writers portray is how they try to educate people in the West about Iran. Most Westerners, it seems, have little or no knowledge of Iran simply because their interactions with the Iranian community in the West are few and far between. This is due mainly to Iranians' inclusive culture and lack of communication with Americans, which has resulted in the latter's lack of proper knowledge, especially about modern Iran.

Another significant issue is that most people in the West cannot distinguish between Iran and other countries in the Middle East. Geographical information about Iran is rarely taught in the West, nor is there any information on the Persian language and culture, which are entirely different from Arabic languages and cultures. As Daniel Grassian asserts in his book, "Because most Americans and

Westerners have little to no knowledge of the origins, meaning, and importance of Iranian culture and history, writers like Marjane Satrapi and Porochista Khakpour place a high premium on names and upon recovering Persian history" (63).

Grassian is correct in claiming that most Americans do not really know Iran. He argues that Westerners do not have "the ability to distinguish diasporic Iranians based on name or appearance" (63), and this is why most of them are susceptible to the kind of images shown in media, which Grassian and other critics believe are not accurate renderings of Iran and Iranians. Moreover, this is also why these critics argue that Westerners' perceptions of a culture like Iran's "are unreliable, tainted by media stereotypes and presuppositions" (64). This lack of knowledge and the meaning-laden images that Western media have presented to the public have made the lives of Iranians difficult.

Furthermore, one cannot overlook the significance of other events that have changed these immigrants' lives. In particular, one can discuss the influence of 9/11 on American policies, in both the domestic and international arenas, and how this paradigm-shifting event had severe ramifications for the United States and Middle Eastern immigrants whose countries were accused of having plotted the events. In other words, it was 9/11 and the rise of xenophobia that followed it which resulted in even more backlash against Middle Eastern Americans who were living in fear simply because they would instantly be considered a threat due of their skin color, accents, and other stereotypes.

This inability to tell who is an Iranian and who is not makes the situation even worse for Iranians in the United States. They are mistakenly considered to be Arabs and therefore experience another layer of suspicion and scrutiny. In fact, this is what one of the Iranian writers in the West, Marjane Satrapi, said in her interview with Simon Hattenstone. In the said interview, she argues that the West "always reduces Iran to Hizbullah or 1001 Arabian Nights; the flying carpet or the flying rocket" ("Confessions of Miss Mischief"), which further corroborates the fact that most Westerners cannot distinguish between Persians and Arabs. The famous author of *Persepolis* (2000) and *Persepolis 2* (2002) puts greater emphasis on this argument in her essay titled "How Can One Be Persian?" in which she says, "We are set, stuck, really, somewhere between Scheherazade's famed *One Thousand and One Nights* and the bearded terrorist with his manic wife disguised as a crow" (20). She further says that "Iran has extremists, for sure. Iran has Scheherazade as well. But first and foremost, Iran has an actual identity, an actual history—and above all, actual people, like me" (23).

It is worth pointing out that almost all Muslims were targeted in the United States following the events of 9/11. The terrorist attacks on American soil only heightened

discrimination against Muslims because of what Maha Hilal calls "collective responsibility for Muslims," implying that because the attacks were planned by a Muslim country, all Muslims were to blame (xiii). Being from a Muslim country that also reminds people of the 1979 revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis, however, made it even harder for Iranians to continue their normal lives in the West after the September 11 attacks.

The issues mentioned above reveal that numerous factors have contributed to the demonization of Iranians in the West. Still, one that stands out is the September 11 attacks which changed the world order forever. Iranians had already been stigmatized because of the hostage crisis and the anti-West rhetoric of Iranian students involved in it, but 9/11 fueled this stigmatization and took it to another level. To explore how the September 11 attacks specifically changed the lives of Middle Eastern Americans, we will employ Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of cultural trauma to analyze three select novels written by Iranian diasporic writers reacting to 9/11, namely, *The Iranican Dream* by Siamach Baniameri, *Pomegranate Soup* by Marsha Mehran, and *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* by Porochista Khakpour.

Defining Cultural Trauma

Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, a collaborative work in the field of cultural trauma with contributions from five prominent sociologists, was published in 2004. Throughout its six chapters, each sociologist offers a unique vision of what constitutes cultural trauma, and this paper focuses on Alexander's chapter because of its emphasis on the relationship between threats to group identity and the ensuing cultural trauma. We believe that this element of his theory is crucial in portraying the conditions of the diasporic Iranians in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

In his chapter, Alexander critiques two famous theories of trauma, namely, the psychoanalytic and the enlightenment theories, for their "naturalistic fallacy," which assumes that certain events can be traumatic regardless of the social sphere in which they unfold. Alexander refutes this premise and argues that: "First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" (8). Alexander further explains that such an attribution does not necessarily happen at the time of the incident; rather, the said attribution can occur before, during, and even after an event unfolds.

Moreover, one could argue that his theory of cultural trauma is indebted to a Durkheimian meaning of the word "imagined." In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2012), Émile Durkheim argues that phenomena in this world exist in two

very different forms of reality—the reality of their existence in the 'real' world and their reality in our consciousness. Therefore, the way we perceive a phenomenon individually is very different from how we perceive it with others. This is why Durkheim uses two different terms, "individual totem" and "collective totem," to describe these two forms of reality. Durkheim says:

> Therefore, the representations that express them seem to us very different from those that collective influences awaken in us. The two sorts of representation form two kinds of mental state, and they are as separate and distinct as the two forms of life to which they correspond. As a result, we feel as though we are in touch with two distinct sorts of reality with a clear line of demarcation between them: the world of profane things on one side, the world of sacred things on the other. (212)

Alexander claims that his theory of cultural trauma, which runs in opposition to both the enlightenment and psychoanalytic theories of trauma, shares their premise which is, the way collectivities see and experience events could be more important than the actuality of those events. In fact, he posits that, just like what Durkheim says, "[i]magination is intrinsic to the very process of representation. It seizes upon an inchoate experience from life, and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape" and that "it is only through the imaginative process of representation that actors have the sense of experience" (9). Consequently, one can finally see Alexander's main problem with the two theories of trauma that he says suffer from the naturalistic fallacy. In other words, Alexander's approach is not very much concerned with the reality and nature of the event, but rather, with how the event unfolds in a social sphere, how it is perceived by a collectivity, and how it is responded to in a collective form. In Alexander's own words:

> …while every argument about trauma claims *ontological reality*, as cultural sociologists, we are not primarily concerned with the accuracy of social actors' claims, much less with evaluating their moral justification. *We are concerned only with how and under what conditions the claims are made, and with what results*. It is neither ontology nor morality, but *epistemology*, with which we are concerned. (9; emphasis added)

In Alexander's epistemological conception of trauma, "[i]dentity involves a cultural reference. Only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves" (10). Adopting Alexander's epistemological approach, we can deal with 9/11 and other similar events with a

method of analysis that will prove fruitful not only for scholars and academicians but also for ordinary people whose lives have been touched by the event. Therefore, an epistemological approach will equip us with pertinent questions about 9/11 itself and the literature that has been produced because of it.

To understand how such an approach will be more productive, one need not go further than analyzing the types of questions that the epistemological approach poses instead of the questions posed by the ontological approach. Whereas the ontological approach, which has preoccupied Western literary canon ever since the events of 9/11, questions our ability to *properly represent* the event, and whether or not we can actually even try to represent a traumatic event in the first place—epitomized in such reactions as Toni Morrison's claim that "there is nothing to say" (qtd. in Bell 99), or Baudrillard's and Derrida's responses that focus on 9/11 being "out of range for a language" which "admits its powerlessness" (qtd. in Borradori 86)—the epistemological approach tackles the question of 9/11 from a completely different perspective and asks, for instance, the following questions: How is the traumatic event perceived and narrated? Who is the narrator and why has he decided to narrate the event? Who is the intended audience, and why is it important for them to hear about the event? Is the narrator making any declarations and claims about the event and its meaning to both themselves and the intended audiences? And finally, how are the events, the victims, and the perpetrators portrayed in the narration?

Alexander's theory on cultural trauma can help us navigate through these questions. He generally defines cultural trauma as such: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). This broad definition, however, needs a lot of clarification in terms of how it occurs in society as a whole. One distinction should be made right away because it is at the core of how Alexander's theory is different from other theories of trauma. For Alexander, not all events lead to trauma as previously discussed above in relation to the naturalistic fallacy.

Moreover, Alexander believes that cultural trauma should arise from some form of a cultural crisis; in other words, an event should be significant enough to penetrate the social sphere of society and influence the largest group of people. Cultural trauma, Alexander argues, is not about a group of people feeling pain because of an incident, but rather this form of trauma includes an "acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (10). An important observation to be made here is that this insight from Alexander's theory makes it

clear why his notion of trauma is associated with the concepts of collective memory and collective identity. Therefore, one could argue that it is only when an event has made permanent marks on the memory of a collectivity so much that they feel that their identities have somehow changed that we can label an event as being culturally traumatic. Moreover, it is only after such realization on the part of the collectivity that "Collective actors 'decide' to represent *social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are*, *where they came from*, and where they want to go" (10; emphasis added). The question still remains: How do these collective actors represent the pain? Alexander would say, through claim-making processes that constitute cultural trauma. He specifically points out that:

> The persons who compose collectivities broadcast symbolic representations-characterizations-of ongoing social events, past, present, and future. They broadcast these representations as members of a social group. These group representations can be seen as 'claims' about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply. It is a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution. (12)

This claim-making process depends on various parts of society. However, what is central to it is the "spiral of signification," a concept Alexander borrows from Kenneth Thompson, wherein the "Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story" (12). Thompson uses this concept in *Moral Panics* (1998) and argues that moral panics have become so recurrent and so pervasive, they sometimes challenge entire foundations and institutions. For instance, child abuse become a moral panic to attack the family unit in its entirety. In particular, he uses this concept to address how discursive strategies and practices of societies allow "signification spirals" to increase fear over moral panics afflicting children, such as sex, mugging, ecstasy, family, etc., but Alexander uses this concept in the context of people creating narratives about an event that is threatening their collective identity. In a sense, what Alexander is saying is that this whole process is a story-telling procedure in which certain collective actors decide to tell their version of the events. As with other stories, those of trauma are based on four core elements that Alexander classifies as: 1) the nature of the pain; 2) the nature of the victim; 3) the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience; and 4) the attribution of responsibility (13–15).

To summarize, one could argue that what Alexander is proposing here is an analysis of who tells the story of an event and to whom it is told, which has been proven problematic for certain populations, especially those with less access to mainstream media because their accounts of events usually get neglected. Consequently, what Alexander is concerned with in his theory is neither the authenticity of the events and the claims, nor a moral investigation of the storyteller; rather, he is concerned with "how and under what conditions the claims are made and with what results" (9). His theory is so much intertwined with aesthetics, in that he is more concerned with the creation process rather than the event which is being described. Alexander's main interest, therefore, lies in highlighting the signification practices of members of a group. His theory of cultural trauma focuses on representations of an event that have changed a group's identity; he is trying to see how this newly formed identity, which is the result of a significant event, leads to the production of works about the event. Alexander asserts, "Insofar as meaning work takes place in the aesthetic realm, it will be channeled by specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis" (15). He argues that producing these narratives can serve multiple purposes. On the one hand, they create a sense of solidarity and unity among the members in the face of a culturally traumatic event; on the other, the act of writing proves therapeutic for them. This is why this paper argues that Alexander's theory can be used to analyze the way Iranians portray their predicaments in the US in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Cultural Trauma in the Novels of the Iranian Diaspora

Iranians in diaspora have written in two major genres in the past few decades, namely novels and memoirs. Any study done on the literature of Iranian diaspora will ultimately have to focus on these two genres, but the present study only focuses on novels because the authors believe the genre of memoir has always been problematic for Iranian writers. The problematic nature of this genre stems from two sources: one, the fact that public expression of the self is an uncomfortable area to explore within the Iranian culture, and two, that the Persian word *khaterat* (i.e., the Persian equivalent of memories or the genre of memoir) is very hard to define within the literary boundaries of literature as it is understood in the West. The following discussion will try to address these two issues.

The first issue to be discussed is the Persian word *khaterat* and its relation to Western lexicon about self-narrative. This word can have various denotations and can include a variety of genres in which some form of self-revelation occurs; therefore, whereas Persian writers may have included certain self-revelatory sections within their works, one could not argue that they have published memoirs in the sense that a western writer and reader might expect. In other words, one could argue that

this lack of memoir publication might be attributed to the way Persian literature defines self-narrative in the word *khaterat*. As Farideh Goldin has maintained:

> The Persian word *khaterat* is often used casually by Iranians to refer to any autobiographical narrative. *Khaterat* can be Forough Farokhzad's poetry, or Homa Sarshar's *In the Back Alleys of Exile*, which is a collection of essays and poetry, or Zohreh Sullivan's *Exiled Memories*-all very important and groundbreaking books, but not memoirs as defined by western literary standards. (32)

William Hanaway also touches upon this issue and argues that an accepted definition of the memoir is "too Western-centered and culture-bound for Iranians to make use of it" (62). This is probably why many of the works written prior to the boom in memoir writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century are not considered memoirs because they fail to incorporate the genre's widely accepted norms and features into the story.

One final reason why *khaterat* and memoirs seem to be incompatible is whereas the former is a highly personal account, usually recorded in prose or verse, that focuses on the self, the genre of memoir, usually written in prose, requires the memoirist to portray snippets of the self in relation to wider sociopolitical conditions, a quality which is absent in *khaterat* because its practitioners do not often contextualize the self within broader social and political conditions of the country. As many critics have noted, Iranians were late to the genres of autobiography and memoir, and have enumerated different reasons for the dearth of such books in Iran's literary history. For instance, in *Veil and Words*, Farzaneh Milani argues that this issue is deeply rooted in the culture of Iran. She writes, "Avoiding voluntary self-revelation and self-referentiality, most Iranian writers have turned their backs on autobiography" (202). Milani in her essay "Veiled Voices" also posits that such other parameters as "humility, self-censorship, discretion, and unfavorable living conditions" have forced Iranian writers, especially female ones, to ignore this popular genre (10). This, however, does not mean that Iranian writers have abandoned memoirs altogether. Recent decades have indeed seen a boom in memoir writing, but novels, because of their fictional and constructed nature, are still preferred, hence the focus of this study on three novels. One explanation for this preference could be the fact that these writers might not have experienced the trauma of the 9/11 attacks personally, and could not have possibly written about themselves; however, the fear and confusion among diasporic Iranians was collectively felt, and the flexibility and freedom of the novel provided them with a better medium to use their creativity to create fictional worlds in which those feelings could be further explored.

Most Iranian writers decided to write about Iran as a result of the 9/11 events. In fact, 9/11 led to a rise in curiosity regarding the Middle East, in general, and Iran, and English-speaking readers were, indeed, looking for books that would give them "rare glimpses of life [in Iran] through a lens that is not colored by the western media" (Goldin 35). Roya Hakakian, another immigrant writer, comments on her decision to write about Iran by saying, "Many English-speaking friends always wanted to hear the story of Iran and its revolution as I had seen it. So, in a way, I wrote this for them" (qtd. in Goldin 35). Moreover, commenting on Dumas's works, Mersedeh Mehrtash argues that "Firoozeh's work focuses on one of the most important aspects of our community"s efforts towards self-representation: our image. By taking matters into her own hands and writing a book on her experience in America-as an Iranian-American-Firoozeh is helping our community set our image in our own words, and on our own terms" (qtd. in Goldin 34). Here is how these three writers use humor, Persian cuisine, and teenage angst to depict the marginalization of Iranians and their efforts to educate the West about Iran.

The three novels chosen for this study are indicative of the fact that these writers resorted to writing as a method of making sense of their identity in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Even though some Iranian writers wrote memoirs, these three novelists created fictional worlds and characters through which they explored questions of collective identity in the face of culturally traumatic events. In fact, this is the exact point that Firoozeh Dumas, another influential writer of Iranian descent, talks about in the Q&A session of her book *Funny in Farsi* (2003). When asked about the reasons why she took up writing after September 11, she says, "One of the biggest problems I have faced as an Iranian in America is that no one knows much about Iran except what is on the evening news. Politics has grossly overshadowed humanity in the Middle East and I wanted to write a book that would shine the light on humanity" (181). Dumas is not an exception here, and this desire to shine some new light on Iran and dissociate it from 9/11 can be found in the majority of novels and memoirs published after 2001.

To engage in this project, these writers needed to portray the enormity of the September 11 attacks and what it meant to *their* ethnic community as well as how it irrevocably changed who they were. M. Blaim and Amnon Sella have also touched upon the importance of this kind of project. In their book *Constructing Identity in Iranian-American Self-Narrative* (2015), they argue that because ethnic communities "live in an atmosphere of continuing racism and hostility" and, as mentioned earlier, because they feel like they do not fully belong to either country, "constructing a self to suit this situation of quasi-homelessness becomes both particularly arduous and essential" because they have to rebuild themselves and their homelands so that they can have a strong identity (2). This task of recreating oneself and one's

homeland becomes challenging when these ethnic communities decide to publish in English because as Blaim and Sella have argued, novels like the ones chosen for this study need to have multiple allegiances, and they often walk on a fine line between two opposing belief systems (2).

The novels analyzed here seem different from each other on the surface because each one uses a specific technique to tell a story. The unifying element that connects all three of them is their portrayal, in their own unique ways, of the culturally traumatic nature of the 9/11 attacks and the way Iranians persevered in the aftermath despite constant exposure to xenophobia, Islamophobia, and Iranophobia. All three novels take a two-fold approach to the issues of 9/11 and its impact on the lives of immigrant Iranians. On the one hand, the narratives raise awareness about a lack of knowledge and understanding of Iran; on the other hand, they make their characters educate Western characters on Iranian people and their culture.

In the following section, we will try to elucidate how these immigrant writers portray the stages of the claim-making process in almost identical manners, despite their different techniques.

Siamack Baniameri's *Iranican Dream*

The Iranican Dream (2004) by Siamack Baniameri narrates the story of a Middle Eastern man in the United States and his bizarre encounters with family, friends, and other Americans. The book portrays an Iranian couple who try hard to deal with their marital issues while raising their teenage children who have ambivalent feelings about their parents' ethnicity and familial relations.

Baniameri's approach to 9/11 and its impact on the lives of immigrants is a little different from the that of the two other works to be analyzed. Whereas most of the novels and memoirs written by hyphenated Iranians have a serious tone in addressing specific issues—primarily because they deal with a life-changing event—Baniameri resorts to humor to talk about 9/11 and its social and psychological impacts. This, however, should not be seen as a lack of seriousness, nor should it be construed as being unsympathetic towards 9/11 and its impact on Iranians. In fact, Baniameri resorts to humor the way Dumas and Satrapi also do—to highlight the problems of Iranians in diaspora, especially after the September 11 attacks.

In general, critics classify humor theories into three distinct groups, namely, the superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. The first one, the superiority theory, was best delineated by Thomas Hobbes when he argued that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception

of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (65). According to Hobbes, humor and laughter are the results of a sudden feeling of supremacy or superiority over others; this theory, however, has also been used to talk about the other side of the coin—inferiority. Therefore, we can argue that for certain writers, laughter becomes a means of talking about their feelings of inferiority in situations where they believe they are unable to change anything.

The second theory of humor is usually associated with the works of Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, who both believed that humor and the laughter that follows are a way of releasing pent-up energy that has been repressed. This theory was first developed by Spencer in order to account for the relationship between the mental side of humor and the physical movement to which it leads. In "The Physiology of Laughter," Spencer argues that "nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion" because that energy and excitement "must expend itself in some way or another" (395). Later on, Freud tried to offer a more refined theory of this relief process in his book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1990). According to Freud, humor can manifest itself through different mediums, such as jokes and comedies, but what is central to all forms of humor is how the unconscious mind tries to discharge sexual and hostile feelings through laughter.

Finally, we have the incongruity theory of humor which has been passed down to us from the time of Aristotle. According to this theory, laughter comes from incongruity, specifically when human beings perceive something as incongruous or believe something to be against the norms. In his *Rhetoric,* Aristotle argues that laughter comes to people in twists of events and "the effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a word; this too is a surprise. You find this in verse as well as in prose. The word which comes is not what the hearer imagined" (3285). Modern philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer also discussed this theory to some extent. For instance, in *Critique of Judgment* (2012), Kant says, "In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (154). In *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), Schopenhauer also draws attention to the element of surprise and argues that one's laughter will be even greater if the incongruity between what is expected and what is offered is more significant.

Baniameri uses humor for a variety of purposes, and our brief discussion of the three theories on humor can be useful in shedding light on these. The inferiority/ superiority theory indicates that people usually resort to humor to either boast

about their superiority over another group, or because they are hiding their feelings of inferiority in hopeless and helpless situations. Baniameri's use of humorous descriptions, therefore, can be argued to be in service of a bigger picture, that of outlining the hostile feelings against immigrants which are central elements in the stories of long-distance nationalists who wish to raise awareness about the sociopolitical conditions of Middle Easterners in the wake 9/11 attacks.

Baniameri starts his novel with an aphorism, uttered by the unnamed protagonist/narrator, on the conditions of Middle Easterners in the United States. He says, "Being a Middle-Eastern American man nowadays is as hard as a stash of beef jerky sitting on top of a pickup truck's dashboard in the Arizona summer heat" (3) and invites the readers to accompany him on his journey of showing the difficulties of being an Iranian about through his unique humor. What is noteworthy about *The Iranican Dream* is that Baniameri is upfront in tackling all the challenges of being a hyphenated Iranian. The narrator is more than ready to discuss his difficulties in life. At the beginning of the story, and upset about how his life has turned out to be, he says:

> Now, you want challenge? Live my life: come to America from the Middle East; learn a new language, new customs, new lifestyle. . . get strip searched every time you pass through security; shave your five o'clock shadow three times a day so you don't accidentally look like one of those pictures of the FBI's ten most wanted terrorists; and constantly wonder if the Department of Homeland Security has planted a camera in your shower. (3–4)

As the story progresses, we get more glimpses into the life of this Iranian-American. The narrator talks about people's ignorance regarding his country of origin, Iran, and later on argues that many of these hostile conditions stem from a lack of knowledge on the part of Americans. During one of these exchanges with an American, the narrator is exhausted by how little Americans know about Iran. After telling an American where he is from, he receives a series of questions like, "Which state is that?" and when he says that Iran is a country, the guy he is talking to replies, "Oh, yeah. Mexico?" to which the narrator responds in the negative and states that it is a country in the Middle East. The American is instantly reminded of 9/11 and says, "Oh, yeah, you guys shouldn't have done the nine-eleven thing. That was not cool" (4). He then insists that of course 9/11 made Americans stronger, so much so that it successfully punished the Middle East. Pointing out to him that Iraq was invaded, the narrator is again taken aback when the American says, "Yeah, right. So, where is your buddy, Osama?" (4).

According to Alexander, a successful narrative by a person who has experienced cultural trauma should manifestly portray the mistreatment his ethnic community has received in the host country. Baniameri's novel starts with the exact portrayal of mistreatment. Alexander also argued that those who decided to tell the stories—they could be referred to as cultural Scheherazade— should also portray the nature of the injustice and the relationship between the victim of that cultural trauma and the wider audiences in the host country. Once again, Baniameri manages to do both when he shows that this conversation with the American was not an isolated incident, calling attention to the embeddedness of racism in the very fabric of American society. The narrator says that his children are ashamed of the way he talks, "and they avoid telling their friends the truth about their father's background," because the narrator believes that they have been influenced by a more prominent brand of racism and xenophobia that exists in the society; he believes that his children are "influenced by the constant images of rock-throwing, car-burning, gun-slinging Middle Eastern men on television" (5). As Grassian has maintained, most American media were trying to shape their viewers' perceptions of the Middle East through "unreliable, tainted media stereotypes and presuppositions" that they broadcast in the aftermath of 9/11, and they were hoping to project an image of the Middle East which the government could use to justify its invasion of the region (64). Through such descriptions, Baniameri also capitalizes on the effect that these images had even on the children of immigrants. This is probably why, in order to avoid peer pressure, the narrator's children introduce him as "Abdul, the rug cleaner, or Hassan, the Middle Eastern plumber" every time they have friends over (5).

These experiences lead to a state of between and betwixt, a situation in which immigrants do not feel welcome in the new country, but cannot return to their homeland. In another part of the novel, the narrator engages in a conversation with his cousin Reza who also lives in the United States. Here is how the conversation reads: "'This place didn't feel like home for the longest time,' Reza said. 'Different culture, language, looks. I always thought—someday—I would go back home and stay'" (68). But because Reza is uncertain of how he will be received back home, he decides to stay in the United States and marries an Iranian girl to keep him company.

The narrator uses every opportunity to voice his concern over so many issues he believes are related to what is wrong with the cultures of the United States and Iran's. But probably the most harrowing experience of the narrator happens right after 9/11 when the tensions are high. He decides to pick up his cousin Reza's cake from a Middle Eastern bakery, and the house gets raided by security forces: "Guns up and ready, they rushed to the kitchen and took me down to the floor. Before I knew what was happening, I was handcuffed and pinned down. Honestly,

I shit my pants" (74). He is then bagged, detained, and interrogated by three officers. When the narrator demands to know what is going on, they reply, "Shut up, you goddamn terrorist" (74), and they start asking him about his contacts and where he intends to take the bomb. Upon denying knowledge of any bomb, he is threatened by one of the officers: "I'll have you shipped to Guantanamo before you know it." The narrator then starts reflecting on how 9/11 influenced his personal life, and this part of the book becomes one of the sincerest sections of the whole novel: "Like millions of Middle Eastern-American folks, my life was turned upside down on September 11" (74), says the narrator, after lamenting that he does not understand why someone would want to kill innocent people. He goes on:

> I've lived most of my life in the United States and I love this country. And like the majority of Middle Eastern folks in the US, I believe in what this country stands for. I believe in freedom, democracy and human rights. I love America because. . . I press forward in life based on what I know, not who I know. I love America because nobody tells me and my children what to do, what to wear, how to look, how to think, what to eat, what music to listen to, what book to read, what politics to believe in and what religion to practice. I love America because I'm not above the law and neither is the chump sitting next to me. And most importantly, I love America because she lets me be. It's true that the system is not perfect. (76)

Another incident recounted in the novel involves the mistreatment of immigrants right after 9/11, when Ali, the narrator's friend, goes to Iraq to get a nose job. In a series of emails exchanged between the two, Ali captures the conditions of Baghdad in poignant terms. He writes, "I made it to Baghdad. The place is a mess" (126), and when he is supposed to go to the hospital to undergo surgery, he writes, "I was on my way to the hospital, and a bomb blew up just a mile away from the hospital. They had all the streets shut down" (127). He finally succeeds in removing his big nose, and then makes it to the airport to fly back to the United States. However, he is detained at the airport because he does not look like his passport photo with the big nose. Even though the lighthearted tone of this episode makes it funny, the incongruity of humor underscores how Baniameri uses this humorous exchange between Ali and the customs agent as a vehicle to talk about some of the problems that Middle Easterners had at the time, problems also depicted in Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*.

Ali writes to the narrator that he was ". . . charged with falsifying documents, aiding insurgents, and attempting to enter American soil for terrorist activities" simply because he looks different (129). He is also threatened that he will be sent to Abu

Ghraib and will be “forced to do the naked human pyramid” (131). Although the novel has a happy ending, the critical tone of the narrative towards both the US and the Middle East encourages many of the book’s Western readers to reevaluate their view of the latter in light of how the former has militarily dealt with countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern countries, and how, through media propaganda, these nations have been demonized.

As mentioned earlier, the novel’s characters usually engage in some kind of transformative dialogue with Western characters leading to a better understanding between the two groups. In *The Iranican Dream*, the protagonist/narrator does not like the idea of his daughter dating an American. Disguising himself, he corners the American boy, Billy, and tells him that he cannot date the girl because she is actually Saddam Hussein’s daughter and Saddam does not like the idea of an American dating his only daughter. After scaring the boy, he realizes that it was a mistake because his action further isolated his daughter. When he finally agrees to them dating, the narrator talks about how the life of Billy changed once he actually got to know his daughter: “Billy also began reading about Middle Eastern culture, which was something I did not expect from a punk rocker. I soon realized that my fears were baseless. My daughter’s character was so strong that she not only did not get influenced by Billy, she actually reshaped Billy’s personality in a positive way” (123). The novel, therefore, encourages readers from the West to go beyond what they see or hear about the Middle East because it is only when they get to know their people that they can start living with them in peace.

Baniameri’s conscious use of humor to highlight the inferiority that Iranians felt after the September 11 attacks underlines their marginalization in the United States because they were accused of conniving with the actual terrorists in the planes. Humor is utilized by Baniameri to emphasize how most Americans have little knowledge about Iran. Morever, humor also shows the incongruity between what Americans think of Iran, how Iranians see themselves and their country, and how these differences in perception can be reconciled through facilitating dialogue between the two cultures. This brings us to the next novel which sheds light on the importance of dialogue between nations and cultures.

Marsha Mehran’s *Pomegranate Soup*

Mehran’s *Pomegranate Soup* (2005) is a delightful combination of fiction and well-crafted recipes of Persian cuisine. The story revolves around the three Aminpour sisters who worked in the revolutionary forces against the Shah’s regime and immigrated to the West out of fear that their lives might be in danger. The story of the sisters, however, is embellished with various recipes of Persian dishes that

constitute important sections of the novel. After moving to London and staying there for a few years, they realize that the hostile attitude towards Iranians will make their lives extremely difficult, so they decide to move to Ireland and take residence in a small village where nobody knows them. In Ballinacroagh, they set up Babylon Café and try to make ends meet by introducing Persian cuisine to the small city.

The novel shows how these newcomers deal with Ballinacroagh's treatment of immigrants, in general, and the Iranian sisters, in particular. The new village is a microcosm of the West, and the novel highlights how the lack of knowledge and proper education about other cultures can lead to acts of violence and discrimination. Throughout the novel, readers are presented with how the various sections of the town's population make the lives of the Aminpour sisters difficult.

All of the attacks against the immigrants are organized and led by the town bully, the businessman Thomas McGuire who thinks he owns everything and everyone in Ballinacroagh. Before the lives of the three sisters unfold in their new home, the novel reveals their story prior to their settlement in the village—how they tried to move to Ballinacroagh from London. The trip is painful for them because they realize that as Iranians, they have to go through the same and shared ordeal. They are asked "the same questions about their religion and ethnic background over and over again" making the experience a form of harassment, a pestering that makes one sister Bahar's "big doe eyes wet with frightened tears" (14). In fact, one of their reasons for leaving London was that Bahar was being harassed at her workplace, simply because she seemed foreign and exotic. Even though they travel to another part of the world in search of a new home, it becomes more apparent that conditions will not change for them.

A few days before the opening of the café, Thomas McGuire passes by and is mesmerized by the smell of saffron and other kinds of spices that come out of the café. He describes the smell as "pure witchcraft" (5) simply because he knows that this place is usually rented out to foreigners. More and more town members are bewildered as to what is going on inside the café behind closed doors. One could argue that the café, with its covered windows and doors, becomes a center of attention for the native people. Moreover, this could also represent the lack of knowledge of the West with regard to Iran, especially because the writer seems to have intentionally described the windows as being covered perceive and understand Middle Eastern countries.

Since the people of Ballinacroagh do not have real knowledge of what goes on in the café, they can only describe it in a negative way. In another instance, Dervla, one of the townspeople who has never seen the sisters and the inside of

the café, tells her friends that she is certain that there is "some sort of heathen hippie" in the café and that behind the doors "lewd animal acts, and drug use" are being done (25). Dervla even goes further and says, "Yes, a nasty reek of foreignness was definitely in the air" (26). The novel, of course, does not restrict this xenophobic behavior to one or two characters; nor does the narrative portray everyone in town as being xenophobic.

What makes Mehran's novel unique is the way she weaves the xenophobic treatment of foreigners into the fabric of the story and how such behavior can have lethal consequences for those who are targeted simply becauseof their ethnic background. For instance, when schoolboys see the youngest sister Layla walking to do some shopping for the café, they instantly express their desire to possess her because she appears foreign to them. Layla's experiences of different acts of racism and discrimination are not only limited to the town; it seems that ever since they left Iran, every school she attended made her feel an outsider. Before school starts in this new town, Layla and her sisters recall her previous experiences:

> In a decade of regularly televised hijackings and terrorist bombings carried out by masked Middle Easterners, new schools for Layla tended to be breeding grounds for endless taunting sessions; accusations of "terrorist" and "hijacker" were thrown around the school yard like recess diversions. Their youngest sister would usually be too terrified to sleep the night before she started at a new school. (71)

The people of the village let the sisters know that they are not welcome. This difference in attitude towards the sisters manifests itself even in the name of the café. While the café reminds Estelle of the hanging gardens of Babylon, the other members of the town who have not had any interaction with the sisters instantly interpret the name of the café in a negative light and judge the owners accordingly. An old lady, for instance, exclaims, "Babylon! Sinful, that is" and quickly concludes that no matter what these sisters are doing "it can't be civilized" (75). Even Layla's boyfriend, Malachy, who falls in love with her the moment he sees her at school seems unable to completely understand Layla and her sister. When he finally asks Layla where she is from, and he hears Iran, he quickly replies "No! Iran. Isn't that a very dangerous place?" (91), which forces Layla to wonder if she is "ashamed of Iran, of being Iranian" (92). Attitude towards immigrants manifests in other comments such as "Harlot of Babylon" (134), "foreign hussy" (135), "*Bleedin Arabs*" (139), and "sluts" (191). Thomas even confronts Malachy—one of the few people in town who try their best to understand these newcomers—about his relationship with Layla: "What's this I hear about you and the Arab whore." When Malachy tells him that she is Iranian and not an Arab, he replies, "whore or not, she's still the enemy" (100).

As soon as Layla enters the pub, almost everyone stares at her, while some of the men at the bar shout “Go back to yer stinking camels!” (140). This episode is interesting in the context of the literature of the Iranian diasporic community because the reference to camels is present in other novels as well. For instance, this symbol of primitivism also appears in Khakpour’s *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* when Xerxes Adam, the son of an Iranian family who immigrated to the United States, receives a card with a camel on it from one of his friends at school. Khakpour describes this experience as traumatic for Xerxes so much so that he even drifts away from his family and whatever is associated with Iran and its history, and tries his best to fully assimilate by denying his ties with Iran. Much to Xerxes’ chagrin, however, his efforts are thwarted when he faces even worse acts of racism despite his constant efforts to dissociate himself from his family. In the same manner, the reference to camels is repeated by the people of Ballinacroagh in order to show the Aminpour sisters that they are not accepted in their community.

Still enraged that these “darkie” girls had taken residence in *his* town, Thomas thinks to himself, “Just look at what those cows have done to his place . . . . That was right; this was his place, always had been, always would be” (214). Thomas continues vandalizing the café until he finally collapses due to what seems to be a heart attack. When Marjan sees the café, she feels alone and frightened, but then she tries to remember how her mother used to comfort them whenever they felt so in their childhood. It is worth mentioning that these are two feelings that most Middle Easterners felt after the events of 9/11.

Mehran’s characters also engage in transformative dialogues with the people of the village. Marjan and her sisters, of course, try their best to teach their fellow townspeople about Iran and its rich culture. For instance, they tell their customers about the hanging tapestry in the café, in an effort to explain how Iran is host to various ethnic populations which all live together peacefully: “Each region in Iran has its own specific rug pattern” which is reflective of its local history, says Marjan to one of the customers who asks her about it (76). Marjan’s cooking is another way of bringing people closer: “Through her recipes, Marjan was able to encourage people toward accomplishments they had previously thought impossible” (78). At one point in the novel, Marjan also tries to explain to certain customers the centrality of the family in Iranian society. Teaching Father Mahoney how to eat *abgusht*, a famous Iranian dish, she is reminded of *Yalda*—winter solstice—and the many customs and traditions that Iranian families perform. They even go further and start telling their customers about the contemporary history of Iran and the reasons why they left. They speak of the growing discontent with the Shah’s regime when they were children, and how the Shah destroyed the country. Marjan says:

> The time of Reza Shah, a time of complete stupidity and ignorance . . . . And now his idiot son was squeezing the country dry and senseless, claiming an improbable connection to the great Zoroastrian rulers of the Persian Empire, the short Shah crowned himself King of Kings and robbed the last shreds of dignity from Persian people. As most of his subjects rotted away in mud huts devoid of electricity and proper sewage, barely existing on pittance wages, the Shah filled his coffers with American-bought weaponry, African diamonds, and Parisian furs, financing it all with the land's vital bloodline, oil. (107)

In an interview before her untimely demise, Mehran talked about why she chose cooking as an extended metaphor in her novel. In that interview, she says, "cooking is a perfect expression of love" and it symbolizes a "deeper longing for home, for a safe place to eat" (228). Mehran also touches upon another significant aspect of her novel, the idea of Zoroastrian balance in the story. She says:

> As I toiled on the manuscript, at some point it dawned on me that something was missing from my story—a sense of joy. A happiness and vitality that is particular to Iranians, to Persian culture itself. I wanted to express the beauty of my birthplace, a vision I knew was incongruous with the dark, violent images Westerners see when they think of Iran. . . taking on the very serious topics of immigration and integration. (230–31)

Mehran, therefore, does her best to incorporate the Zoroastrian system of contrast in her novel in the form of good and evil characters and the many interactions they have together. This Zoroastrian system explains everything in binary oppositions and creates a harmony based on the pairs that interact with their opposing pairs. Mehran incorporates this system into her novel by talking about the various moods of human beings and how each person's mood is congruent with a special assortment of food that are either *garm* (hot) or *sard* (cold). Through recipes and cooking, Mehran talks about this eternal clash between good and bad, and offers a glimmer of hope that all might end well if the two sides make an effort to understand each other.

Mehran's novel, overall, uses cooking and food as metaphors for reconciliation between strange and estranged cultures. Alexander posits that culturally traumatic events encourage affected populations to formulate their identity in relation to that trauma so as to understand themselves better. Mehran shows how cooking becomes a therapeutic practice for the sisters so they can come to terms with who they are. Alexander also points out that ultimately, these cultural collectivities

engage in dialogue with other cultures so that the host culture can also understand the predicaments of the immigrant culture. Once again, Mehran's incorporation of Persian cuisine in the novel paves the way for this meeting of cultures; therefore, the resolution of the novel reveals how food and cooking can go beyond social and political disagreements and differences and bring two cultures together because the Iranian sisters finally find their place in the community.

Porochista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*

The last work to be analyzed, Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects,* is the story of the Adams, an Iranian family based in the United States, their struggles as an immigrant family, and finally their disrupted life after the September 11 attacks. This novel focuses on the relationship between an immigrant father, Darius, with nostalgic ties to his homeland, and the teenage angst of his son, Xerxes, who tries to know himself better as a second-generation Iranian-American.

As Hasan Kaplan has maintained, immigrants from the Middle East normally face "two separate identity crises," the first of which is "the crisis of maintaining already formed and inherited traditional (ethnic and religious) identity experienced and voiced by the parent generation" and the second, "the crisis of forming a new identity between two seemingly conflicting (family tradition and Western/ American way) cultures, experienced by the second generation" (3). Discussed earlier in this article was how most American media represented Iran as patriarchal and sexist after 9/11. In their portrayal of a diverse country like Iran, most American media fed their people "unreliable, tainted stereotypes" (Grassian 64) and described Iranians as either Islamic fundamentalists or as suppressed oriental women who are expected to stay at home and perform their duties as obedient wives.

The story of the Adam family is Khakpour's effort to show how the perception of Iran and Iranians held and perpetuated by American media and their people are far from real. Following the same formula that other writers have also used, Khakpour begins by highlighting the mistreatment of this Iranian family in the United States, which is a necessary step stipulated by Alexander in identifying an event as culturally traumatic.

One of the first instances of racism towards immigrant populations happens in this novel when Xerxes receives a Christmas card from his friend Adam when he was a child. The narrative reveals that Adam is extremely annoyed by Darius's taking such great pride in his Iranian heritage, and this is the reason why he tries to insult Darius and his son Xerxes with a Christmas card. Adam's card includes a drawing of camel, which both Darius and Xerxes know to be a symbol of the primitive culture. As was discussed earlier, most Iranians are usually mistaken for being Arabs in

the United States, and this camel has been an insulting symbol for people who are believed to be Arabs. Therefore, the card that Xerxes receives has two levels of insult written all over it. Darius and Xerxes feel insulted because they believe Xerxes's friend has used the camel drawing as a subtle way of making fun of their Iranian nationality. What is worse is that Adam, i.e., Xerxes's friend, is even unable to realize that Darius and his family are not even Arabs. Xerxes's reaction to the card illustrates how such an open act of racism can have everlasting effects on the life of a child. Khakpour writes, "How clearly he understood, as just a young kid, what the camel symbolized. It had left him in a daze for the rest of the day. He avoided Adam like the plague, hid in the bathroom for recess, and at 3:15 when the final bell shrieked, he sprinted into his father's car" (70). Even though Darius tries to help his son recover from this traumatic incident by saying that "camels have nothing to do with us" (71), neither Darius nor Xerxes ever forgets this incident because they cannot cope with it in a way that the misunderstanding might be resolved. They find no closure as they do not confront Adam, nor do they even report him to his parents or school administration.

Nevertheless, this incident has its silver lining, at least to some extent. This incident makes Xerxes realize that he will never be able to forget his Iranian background; thus, whenever he is asked about his name, for instance, he tries to give "a lesson in Farsi" and explains the significance of his name (181). However, when he realizes that people do not pay attention to a child like him, he forgets about explaining to people where he comes from.

Xerxes, however, does not really like to emulate his father because he believes that Darius is too nostalgic, and this, according to Xerxes, is not an option because he wishes to be accepted in American society. As a result, and in an act of defiance directed against his father, Xerxes repeats the very same stereotypical beliefs about Iran: "The Iranians, Xerxes thought, were always wishing things dead, imagining death, wondering about the dead, ready to curse everything with dead-stuff. Death was everywhere" (52). Xerxes insists on this image of Iran being associated with death when he repeats the same line of thinking elsewhere in the novel: "the Iranians . . . were made for tragedy, always trapped in some sad dramatic past, generational pain, familial anguish, personal turmoil, a collective tragic disposition, an almost genetic mass pessimism" (59–60). This unrelenting pessimism towards Iran is an effort on the part of Xerxes to be accepted by his American peers as an American and not as a camel-riding immigrant.

Even though the members of the Adam family have mixed feelings about Iran, 9/11, and its consequences—particularly, the continuing racism and scapegoating of Middle Easterners in the United States force them to think about visiting the

country that is being being vilified in American media and society. After 9/11, Darius realizes that their portrayal of Iran is that which it is not; at some point, Darius realizes that "his homeland had become a cheap, grim, grainy, black-and-white horror movie" and that Iranians and Middle Easterners were portrayed as monsters (270). Estranged from his family because of living in the United States, Darius then decides that "*Iran felt like the precise remedy to fill all the many holes in his life*" (269). He and Xerxes finally realize that they should try to reconcile the two sides of the identity they have been struggling with. This is the quest to build his and his son's identity around an event that has forever changed the world order.

Just as Iran seems to provide Darius with an excuse to rekindle his relationship with Xerxes, it also becomes a reason for Suzanne, the girl whom Xerxes meets and starts dating after 9/11, to prevent her relationship with Xerxes from going awry, by buying two tickets for them to go visit Iran. The novel, however, does not portray the characters becoming perfect family members just because of 9/11. In fact, their dislike for one another continues through the remaining parts of the novel, until Xerxes is detained in Frankfurt Airport simply because he says that he i s from Iran, and when he acted weirdly because his girlfriend has called Darius, 'Dad.' Xerxes's strange reaction to this seemingly insignificant detail is because he always wanted to get away from his Iranian heritage and he did not want his girlfriend to be attracted to the Iranian heritage that Darius was so fond of. That his girlfriend becomes close with Darius feels like a betrayal to Xerxes, who then acts weirdly. After his harrowing detention at the airport, Xerxes realizes that there is literally no alternative identity for him except for his double identity as Iranian-American. He finally realizes that he cannot escape his Iranian heritage and has to embrace his identity as a hyphenated American. It is also through the unsettling experience that Xerxes finds out the importance of family and community, especially when one is trapped in a critical situation like the one following 9/11. Aisha Peña notes that "Since the events of 9/11, American Muslims have been dealing with issues brought about by rising xenophobia" (202), and this xenophobia, according to Riad Z. Abdelkarim, shows itself through "verbal threats to vandalism and discrimination."

Khakpour's usage of teenage angst within the context of what can roughly be described as a coming-of-age story of an immigrant proves useful in following the same path as the one taken by other writers. From the perspective of Alexander, she, too, portrays characters who engage in a meaning-making project to make sense of 9/11, and what it means to be a hyphenated American in its wake. She also shows how her characters use this culturally traumatic event not only to make sense of who they are, despite being attacked and marginalized, but also to show the other characters that they should rethink their views on Iran and Iranians.

CONCLUSION

Immigrant communities in the United States have been struggling to make their voices heard in the country, and the writers of the Iranian diasporic community are no exception. In fact, what writers like Siamack Baniameri, Marsha Mehran, and Porochista Khakpour do is what writers of other ethnicities have also done—Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Ala Al-Aswany's *Chicago* (2007), to name a couple of examples. These writers have taken a critical approach towards domestic and international policies in the United States after 9/11. They have also used their works to voice their concerns over the same subject matter, particularly the fact that the growing racism and xenophobia that came to exist as a result of 9/11 did nothing but antagonize immigrant populations in the United States, populations which have contributed to the economy enormously.

Each one of the writers mentioned above uses a different style of writing to bring a similar project to fruition. In the case of *The Iranican Dream*, incongruity and superiority theories of humor are used to establish 9/11 as a culturally traumatic event, which is the first step in Alexander's theory of cultural trauma. Mehran, on the other hand, uses Persian cuisine and the transformative power of food and cooking to show how cultures can be educated even when trauma is overwhelming, as was the case with 9/11. Finally, Khakpour uses the concerns and anxiety of a young, second-generation immigrant to highlight how estranged family members come together in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to form new bonds in a cruel and unforgiving climate that had marginalized them.

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