

# CHAPTER I

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## Introduction: Fabricating Identity

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” . . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

—Walter Benjamin

The purpose of this book is to read history through the remembered pasts of diasporic Iranians in the United States. As our storytellers weave their identities across two nations—Iran and the United States—the memories recovered in these narratives, part of a constellation formed with earlier images from legend, nation, and everyday life, link the palimpsest of autobiography and identity to that of diasporic history. It is true that colonization, decolonization, revolution, and diasporas have long destabilized the idea of unified identity and nation. Nonetheless, we see witnesses to the stubborn persistence of nations and nationalisms generally understood as the “historical expression of the fundamental unity of any people, transcending the specific social conflicts that threaten to disintegrate civil society.”<sup>1</sup> Diaspora, however, complicates that imagined unity by forging new postessential, postterritorial, and post-national realignments that sometimes crack open the fault lines of ethnic, religious, class, and gender difference repressed by ideologies of sacrosanct national unity. Unlike the sudden shift of exile or forced deterritorialization that clings to the dream of return and gradually evolves into the larger diaspora,<sup>2</sup> the displaced emigré can be defined by contingency, indeterminacy, and moveable identity.

My ethnographic interest in splintered diasporic identities stems from an early awareness of being “not-quite” and Othered wherever I was, and of difficulties with “belonging” and “home.” The war, unemployment, and family

illness provoked a move from my earliest home in Tehran to other more temporary ones in India—Lucknow and Calcutta. The partition of 1947 provoked others. Before I turned seventeen I had moved from Tehran to Lucknow to Calcutta to Madras to Dacca to Karachi to Lahore. Although each move carried predictably mundane loss and estrangement, shortly after I settled into the University of Illinois in the early 1970s I knew I would never return to any of my former “homes.” I had carried my adjustable backpack with me when I left childhood’s countries: Iran, India, Pakistan—places that seemed to demand allegiances I could not give. Baggaged with lifelong ambivalence toward the troubling signposts of my pasts defamiliarized by history, I felt that the changing spaces I created around myself in the spacious Midwest constituted my chosen unhomey “home.”<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to an exile’s forced separation from an inaccessible homeland, my journeys were a continuation of a late nineteenth-century Persian diaspora—a voluntary displacement, a scattering of Iranians through India, Burma, Pakistan, and Bengal in search of trade. The communities I lived in saw no contradiction between their efforts to remain a separate group and their accommodation to the new postpartition Pakistan. Colonial culture had already taught this Persianized enclave the strategies required to straddle fences, the ways to occupy dual contact zones between the colonizer and the colonized and not belong to either.

Thus it was that when I returned to Tehran in the spring of 1997 after an absence of twenty-five years, I could find no place that I looked for and I recognized nothing—not the landmark squares and fountains that populate the city, not the college where I once taught, not even the street where I once lived.<sup>4</sup> I wrote in my journal: “I remember something I don’t remember. I remember loss and anxiety. I am reminded of the poet to whom the city felt like a body with phantom limbs—spaces lost and amputated and yet present.” I have lived halfway between many a “here” and a “there,” sometimes fearing, sometimes cherishing fragments of the past—but always negotiating a space that kept me slightly outside its embrace. In the midst of an evening during that 1997 return, surrounded by a circle of women holding hands in meditative unity, I suddenly recognized in my multiple dislocation and discomfort an uncanny alienation from such culturally exclusive circles of intimacy. While I wanted to record the event and hear the women’s stories, I wanted even more fiercely to flee my unnameable fears.

It is that repeated flight I try to counter with this book. Through the many voices that speak of home-in-exile, this book writes and unwrites mutilated memory, negotiating the troublesome boundaries between home and not-home. And as a work of memory, it tries to remember what I have forgotten. I use fragments of my own story of migration as frame not to identify with the trauma of recent postrevolutionary diaspora but rather to suggest a range of diasporic experience, and to contrast my ambivalence towards home and nation<sup>5</sup> with the nostalgia in some of the stories I record.

For me, “home” became the Midwest not only because it was the space within which I raised my children and studied and taught for more than half my life, but also because it is a place where I am allowed to construct my own imagined community.<sup>6</sup> As the convergence of economic, personal, political, and cultural specificities inscribed in the shifting lines drawn on alienating maps, childhood’s homes were always spaces of anxiety—unexpected new locations subject to rapid geographic and emotional change amidst an ever-expanding set of extended families. My earliest sense of home was complicated by a ghostly other home elsewhere—someplace we were not. Although they were places in which I was welcome, the word “home” has no single originary source, no single center, no monolithic associations with childhood’s stability or with the privilege of belonging and ownership. Neither do the words “country” or “patriotism.”<sup>7</sup> In part, this is because growing up female in the subcontinent in the 1950s taught me early lessons in the gendering of authority, sexuality, and power inflected through the Persian community’s certainty of and desire for difference, first from Hindu, then from Indian and Pakistani culture.

### Reading a History and Geography of Authority: Rites of Passage, Gender, and Problems of Self-Fashioning

My emotional life—centered around a blind, saintly Persian grandmother, who saw her first eight children die in early childhood, who thought that suffering was the destined lot of women, and who taught me to read the Qur’an—was, in part, formed around ideas of religious propriety, purity, dirt, and danger; and around the word *najis* (unclean) that served as both warning and admonition. More generally, I knew that to be Muslim was to be pure, that Hindus were impure, and that girls were pure until they had a period.

I earned my way into adulthood and definition in Pakistan at the age of fourteen when, during *Moharrum*, I could lead a recitation (*Nowheh*) and beat my chest into impassioned shades of purple and blue. *Moharrum*, the month of mourning for Imam Husain, the prophet’s grandson, was the favorite month for us as children because the entire Persian community (an “imagined community” in more ways than we knew) collected together to mourn but also, more importantly, to eat (or so it seemed) constantly. The idea of community filled a gap created by our fragmented pasts. It convinced us that we centered around rituals that would protect us (it certainly nourished us) against all that threatened in the outside world. It was a month of togetherness when we all wore black and intensified communal ties by attending the same houses of mourning and by dressing so as to distinguish us from the Sunnis. The first month of the Islamic year, it was devoted to

ritual lamentations over the death of Husain at the hands of Yazid and his men on the battlefield of Karbala in A.D. 680. The conflict was over the succession to the Caliphate that Shiia Islam believes should rightfully pass from Mohammad to Ali to Husain and the rest of the twelve Imams—the last of whom remains hidden. During this month, Husain was a living part of our daily lives: we wore black for the first ten days, during which we heard repeated stories (*Rowzeh*) and mourned the loss of each member of Husain's martyred family: his journey to Kufa (that had, we were told, invited him to preserve Shiite Islam from the tyranny of Moawiya and his son Yazid) was interrupted on the plains of Karbala where the first death, that of his assistant Hazrat Moslem, was followed by those of Husain's two infant sons Ali Akbar and Ali Asgar, of Abbas his half-brother, of his nephew Qassim whose marriage to Husain's daughter turned into a funeral, and of all the other men in the party.

My favorite *Nowhehs* (hymnlike chants, or choral laments) were about the deaths of the children, Ali Akbar and Ali Asgar. Our role in the gatherings we called the *Majlis* was to chant the repetitions in the choral lament, to repeat the scene of lamentation of the women at each death culminating in the death of Husain on *Ashura*, the tenth day, when his head was cut off by Shimr, the hated leader of Yazid's army. Religious leaders in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s defied authority during this particular month by identifying the Shah as the contemporary Yazid, and *rowzeh khans* (rhapsodic preachers) would evoke the themes of Karbala—the loss of the ideal Islamic community and government—to point to Pahlavi injustice. Among the revolutionary slogans in 1979 (derived from Ali Shariati's writings) was "Every Day Is Ashura: Every Place Is Karbala." As a minority Shiia community in Sunni Pakistan in the innocent 1950s, we associated the rituals of *Moharrum* with the lost land of origins most of us had never seen.

Looking back on my memories of Moharrum, I see how it taught us to link adult identity with mourning, with a perpetual state of loss to which the child was immune. The fact that I could not weep over Imam Husain but could over Mrs. Henry Wood's *Evelyne* or anything by Charles Dickens was a source of puzzlement to me. Tears over Imams implied a state of "*savab*" (divine merit). Depth of character was associated with the ability to feel and give expression to grief. Adulthood, we felt, would arrive automatically equipped with the ability to empathize totally with the grief of the families of Imam Hasan, Husain, Ali, Fatima, and Zainul Abedin who eternally mourned their loss. But the ability to publicly mourn the deaths of Imams did not translate into the practice of everyday life. Even though we assumed a connection between the public and the private, we knew that our inner emotional lives were sources of confusion, secrecy, and mystery.

When I was twelve and took my first pilgrimage to the holy cities of Karbala, Najaf, and Samereh, we stopped in Baghdad to visit my grandmother's

sister and her family. Her turbaned and long-robed husband was Sayyid Mo-hamad Sadr—a leading figure in politics, parliament, and the court. The gendered geography of the house was split between outer porches and open rooms for men (*birun*) and the enclosed insides (*andarun*) with a courtyard centered around a little pond surrounded by balconied rooms occupied by women.

But the magical figure in that household was the lone male turbaned figure robed in a dark mantle (*abba*) who walked silently outside, sometimes venturing into the women's *andarun* (inner quarters) but for the most part staying in his own outer quarters where he and his male friends would smoke perfumed water pipes and talk politics, beaded *tasbih* (prayer beads) in hand, in a grape arbor from which I was warned away. My mother said girls were to remain inside, that the garden was only for men. When I turned my plea toward my great-aunt, she agreed to let me out because, she said, I was young enough for my presence not to disturb the men. Unknown to me, between the warning to stay in and the permission to go out, the unstable status and identity of a prepubescent Muslim girl was the issue at stake.<sup>8</sup> Of that entire trip to Iraq, those moments in the garden fringed by the symbolic mantle of Sayyid Sadr are most vivid in my memory, perhaps because, at an age when I was most uncentered, they introduced me to the mysteries of another's authenticity and to the power of male authority. The ordering of everyday experience, I soon learned, was one in which the world of women was an enclosed world whose activities had little to do with the world of men who (to my childish envy) went out unchaperoned, studied abroad, worked and earned money, ruled the land and made the laws, and had the right to be served by women.

The layered house, the courtyard with its *andarun* for women, the garden and the *birun* (outside) for men finally made visible the geography of my grandmother's stories of the extended family whose enclosures were layered with religion, food, and ritual. Because she was blind, veiled, and frail, and her religiosity so unobtrusive, I chose to ignore the centrality of religion in her life and in the political life of her extended family. Decades later in a heathen continent I discovered that her sister had been married to Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, the ferociously conservative cleric publicly executed in 1909 for his opposition to the first Constitutional Revolution, after which his family went into exile to Iraq. That figure of Sheikh Fazlullah returned from the repressed to haunt the revolution, and, in a minor key, the margins of this book.

Although Sheikh Fazlullah has been celebrated by the Islamic Revolution in drama and verse, his granddaughter Zia Ashraf Nasr (born 1903), whom I interviewed in 1990, expressed little sympathy with the revolution. As a woman who occupies an important position midway between privilege and persecution, between belonging and exile, Zia Ashraf Nasr seems to

span the century, to embody its history of muted achievement and loss. Her temperament and life were formed in the crossfire of tradition and change, at a time when women began their activities through the formation of secret organizations, the opening of girls' schools, and the publication of women's periodicals. The beginnings of the women's movement in Iran were provoked by the inhumane exercise of patriarchal authority, through marriage laws that made girls of nine marry men of sixty, that allowed women no rights over their bodies, their finances, or their children.

Zia Ashraf attended the first girls' school in Iran, established in her home in Tehran by Tuba Azmudeh in 1907. Education for women, considered undesirable and unnecessary in a patriarchal society structured on the myth of benevolent protection of one sex by the other, began to become a reality at the turn of the century. The American Presbyterian Missionary School, established in Iran in 1874, enrolled about 120 women by 1909. There were fifty schools for girls by 1910. The clergy were opposed to girls' schools, which they characterized as fertile ground for the breeding of future prostitutes.

As a woman from a conservative family, Zia Ashraf Nasr surprises and refutes the monolithic image of the repressed "Islamic woman" constructed by the West. Not that there is no basis to that image—all stereotypes inevitably contain a minute element of truth. But masculine categories of power, action, and work are not synonymous with female categories of the same and often fail to account for the complex variations of power available to women in Middle Eastern societies.

Zia Ashraf had seen the beginnings of the long struggle for women's rights in Iran from the forcible removal of the veil to the hard-won right to vote. The same Constitutional Revolution that saw the death of Nasr's grandfather also saw the beginnings of women's secret societies that opposed foreign powers and supported the revolution. In 1911, when it was rumored that some of the members of Parliament (*Majlis*) were giving in, again, to Russian demands, the women's groups took action. Three hundred women in *chadors* with guns beneath their skirts entered the buildings, confronted the leader of Parliament, tore aside their veils, and threatened the group with their decision to kill their husbands, sons, and then themselves if the independence of the Persian people were again given away.<sup>9</sup> Many other nonviolent protests by women took place between 1912 and 1980. Faranak, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Fereydoun Safizadeh, and Tahereh all took part in the women's demonstration on International Women's Day. We will hear their voices later.

To be born female was to start life with a disadvantage. Afsaneh Najmabadi was born, as she tells the story, into darkness. At hearing that her daughter had given birth to her third female child, her maternal grandmother ordered all the lights of their house to be turned off. Afsaneh's mother, however, compensated for this dark birth through the most enlightened upbringing available for her girl child. When male children were born into

Shusha Guppy's family, her father congratulated her mother with lines from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*:

Sufficient unto women is the art of  
Producing and raising sons as brave as lions.

When a daughter was born, she was welcomed as "such a pretty girl."<sup>10</sup> Tahereh was subjected first to the surveillance and veiling common to girls in her particular class; then to a loveless, arbitrary, and arranged marriage; then to taunting mockery when she was accepted into Tehran University. "Congratulations," said her aunt to her parents. "Your daughter has been accepted into the institute of prostitution." Mandana's brothers offered to pay her the same wages as her job if she would agree to stay home and not go out to work. Mohamad Tavakoli's father feared that his son's training in gymnastics would result in terminal loss of masculinity, that he would become (in this order) a dancer, a drinker, and a sodomist.

Female networks of cooperation and mutual support were not necessarily opposed to male spheres of domination. In Tahereh's family, her father's liberal stance toward his daughter was opposed by her mother's insistence that he prove his manhood by enforcing stricter rules, by removing his daughter from the presence of her young love, and by teaching her the perils of transgression by subjecting the child to an unwarranted and humiliating gynecological exam. Women were a precious commodity to be kept intact until they were bartered as brides. Education, like the loss of virginity, was, in some families, a liberation to be feared. Virginity, therefore, was a girl's most valued property and modesty her most prized virtue.

Yet as these narratives will show, public and private are not necessarily analogous to power and powerlessness, and gender roles in these families are seldom stable or predictable. Gendered variations in familial authority and power are made evident in the contrast between the narratives of the men and women in the following chapters. They vary, for instance, between country and city. Mrs. Kazemi, a country Azari, grounded her understanding of gender equality in her early awareness of men and women working together on farms and not in separate private and public spheres.

### Identifying the Collective: Exile and the Antinomies of Belonging

If, from a remembered perspective, gender and self-identification were problematic, the "we" of collective identification was no less so. I was a child in Calcutta during the 1947 Partition that saw more slaughter in the name of religion and national self-determination than any other comparable event in recent history; I went through middle school, high school, and three years of

college in East and then West Pakistan during its adolescent imaginings of Islamic nationhood.

In contrast to postcolonial Iranians on the subcontinent who were the result of nineteenth-century expatriate economic turmoil, postrevolutionary Iranians in the United States were the result of political violence (and therefore often exiles). Both diasporic groups, however, had one thing in common: they carried a portable ideology that set up alternate cultural spaces in their new homelands. My interest therefore lies in diaspora and exile as ways in which identity is played out, as an entry into notions of self-definition and loss of self-representation, and as a particular case of how we define ourselves against others, of how any group consolidates homogenous selfhood and structures of feeling as defense against the anxieties of division and against lost attachments. My premise here is that cultural and national identities are narrative myths that not only underlie the major political upheavals of our time, but sustain those displaced by such upheaval. Just as American national formation relied, particularly in times of economic stress, on the exclusion of less desirable Others like Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, Irish, Asian Americans, Arabs, Vietnamese, and Iranians, so too Iranian diasporic identity after the revolution, responding to historic, economic, and cultural stress, has sometimes relied on constructing an imagined unity that ironically reinscribes the exclusions that fueled the “people’s” revolution.<sup>11</sup>

As a rather confused child, I thought happiness meant a return to an imaginary country—Iran—where life was always rich with loving relatives and saffron-scented rice. We were a migrating family who had moved (before my birth) from Isfahan to Rangoon to Calcutta to Tehran; then after my birth to Lucknow, Calcutta, Madras, Dacca, Karachi, and Lahore. Somewhere between Dacca and Karachi in the mid-1950s when I was fourteen and my father lost his job, my parents moved back to Iran (Abadan). I did not. I was expected to attend high school and live with relatives in Karachi (Pakistan). Those points of time and place, spiraling around the problematic midnight of India’s 1947, constituted the first of many looms on which my identity was woven.

Even when our extended families had materially and ideologically integrated with the newly formed Islamic state of Pakistan, they insisted on their difference from the Other—the native, the Bengali, Pathan, Punjabi, or Sindhi. That “difference” was a confusing and curious space that seemed occupied by unexamined certainties about identity, by the implicit assumption of a distinction between cultural and national identity that in practice meant that one could hold a Pakistani passport, wear Pakistani clothing, speak Urdu, and be loyal to the idea of the newly formed nation, yet retain a distinctly “Persian” cultural identity within it.

In Dacca, between 1951 and 1954, we lived in an enclave defined by its Persian name—“Ispahani Colony.” Isfahan was the magic city of our imagination; we associated with it bright blue beads, enameled mosques, and ancient

sayings. I remember two. "*Isfahan/Nesf e Jahan*" (Isfahan is half the world) was one, and the other was a rhyming verse:

*Arab dar biyabann malakh mikhorad,  
Sag-e Isfahan ab-e yakh mikhorad.*

The desert Arab must feed on locust  
Yet even the dogs of Isfahan feast on ice water.

Far from being the blue-domed originary city, Ispahani Colony in Dacca was a way of appropriating, resisting, and reterritorializing an alternative enclave of imagined unity amidst what we saw as chaos. In fact, the language and the word "Bengali" were, for the Anglophile/Persian enclave, synonyms for chaos. All the houses in the colony (I recall about fifty and have not sought to confirm my childhood memory) were rented or owned by near, distant, and imaginary relatives of the wonderfully generous Pater Familias, Mirza Ahmad Ispahani—the old man Ispahani as he was called—who protected those vaguely Iranian refugees who had escaped from Burma after the war by finding them homes and jobs in his new tea and jute industries in Bengal. We referred to everyone in the colony and to anyone vaguely related to anyone we knew as "community." I think we felt no uncertainty about its abiding value. It was a matter of concern and interest whether or not "our girls and boys" married inside or outside "the community." This "original" Ispahani was—like so many others in India and Pakistan (the Shirazis, the Nemazis, and the Kashanis)—an Iranian by "blood," by proxy, by association, by metonymy. Somewhere in the distant past, Ispahani's grandfather had migrated to Burma or India and then found himself, like the rest of us, inventing and reinventing imaginary connections to lost origins. Those imaginary connections, however, produced real people who combined their portable culture with postpartition ideology and the material realities of Bengal. Our sense of permanence and stability was provided by these heads of families, the "old man" Ispahani, or the other elder, G. H. Shirazi—names grounded in resonant places like Isfahan and Shiraz that provided scaffolding to our community, a net for us to fall into at the worst of times, and food always awaiting us at the best and worst of times. The Shirazis and Ispahanis gradually migrated to West Pakistan by the end of the 1950s, except for Mirza Ahmad Ispahani who refused, even during the 1972 war, to abandon Dacca and the Bengal to which he had developed a fierce loyalty.

Among the ways we celebrated ourselves as a community, food of course was one of the most delicious. There were an endless host of *Eids* or Feast Days, those celebrated in Iran (like *Norooz* or the pre-Islamic New Year) and those particular to the Muslims in the subcontinent—*Eid-ul-Fitr*, *Eid-e-Qorban*, *Eid-i-Qadir*, and *Eid-i-Mabbas*. We confirmed our identities in the course of gatherings on such *Eids*, during *Ramazan* when we broke our

fasts at one another's homes, and during the month of *Moharrum* when the Majlis ritualized our mourning. We visited every single house during *Eid* and ate at every single table, potatoes and chickpeas soaked in tamarind, spices, and fresh coriander; *samosas* stuffed with cumin, coriander, tumeric, onions, garlic, vegetables, shrimp, or meat; silver-coated *rasmallai*; almond and milk *barfis*; cardamomed *gulab jamuns*; and saffroned *Gajjar* (carrot) halva. Of the foods I remember, only two were Persian in origin—*Sholleh Zard* (a saffroned pudding) and *Shir Berenj* (a creamed rice). Those gestures toward an originary cuisine were happily hybridized with subcontinental foods and articulated with other celebratory practices like the *sofreh* (a ritual meal; literally "table" or "tablecloth") and the *Rowzeh Khuni* (impassioned sermonizing) that were more or less specifically Iranian, and the *Kunda* (another occasion for ritual eating) that was subcontinental.

In the colony where we spoke English to each other, Urdu or Bengali to the servants, and Persian to some of the elders, where we attended Catholic convents, memorized Walter de la Mare and Shakespeare, acted in *Alice in Wonderland*, celebrated Pakistan Day, and imagined ourselves Iranian, some homes out-Persianed others by setting out the *Norooz Haftsin* with its traditional foods said to bring good luck in the year ahead. The "Haftseen" was a ritual table set with seven (*haft*) items starting with the letter *sin* that symbolized rebirth, health, wealth, and love. In addition to the Qur'an, a mirror, and a candle, we had green sprouts (*sabzi*), garlic (*siir*), apples (*sib*), sumac, coins (*secce*), and wheat paste (*samanu*), and, in place of unavailable hyacinths (*sombol*), we placed local fruit starting with the magic letter. We waited for the *Tahvil*—the moment of the spring equinox—and prayed and kissed everyone around. The *Norooz* meal to which my mother always invited others was rice with green herbs (*sabzi pulow*) and fish (*mahi*). As children, we knew that there was a hierarchic though invisible difference between those who had "been-to" and those who relied on past or blood connections with the imaginary homeland.

When I was a student at Kinnaird College in Lahore, my occasional weekends away from the enclosed and fortified college (located on Jail Road) would be spent at the always open home of Mirza Ahmad Ispahani's daughter—Mehrangiz—who had married her first cousin, a Shirazi. The servants (Muslim, of course) were "family servants" who had lived with these unalterable cornerstones for generations. The patriarchs educated their servant's children who then went on to leave the "compound," to go abroad, to return for visits, to become part of the outer circles that, like the rest of us, always knew (or imagined) there was a reliable or symbolic center to which to return—even if that mobile "center" dispersed from Dacca to Karachi to Lahore to Tehran. The community gathered together not only during feast days, but during Moharrum, weddings, and funerals. Sometimes a servant chose to follow a family from Burma to Iran. Elahi left his wife and children and followed my

maternal uncle's family to Abadan—to a land where he was the Other, a lonely alien who looked different, who was unable to speak the language (Persian), yet believed that this was his "family" of choice and that his immediate family deserved his money more than his presence. Or, at least, that is what my uncle's family chose to think, and to say when asked, that Elahi believed. The assumption, I suspect from this distance, was always that servants were lesser breeds who felt less strongly about family. And so our families continued in their cultural complicity with economic values denying the predication of one upon the other.<sup>12</sup>

That lost land of Iran, however, in the context of the newly formed Pakistan, was a Janus-faced entity—both preserver of the original Shiia theocracy and its destroyer. We learned that what differentiates Islam from other major world religions was its "unity," its "Oneness," its consistent denial of separation between God and Caesar, mosque and state. No flirtations for us with ambiguity or with gods that were "three in one." Yet we were expected to understand and accept the splitting of Iranian "nationhood" between its "authentic past" and modern Westernized present. That authentic past was of course again split between the secular and spiritual. Its pre-Islamic secular culture was glorified in centuries of epic and lyric poetry, or in such central culturally observed traditions as the *zurkhanah* (House of Strength where youth or *pahlavans* train to combat national foes) and *Norooz* (the Persian new year). Its spiritual component was split between a generic Muslim history and a Shiia past that saw its essential self as part of a continuum beginning with Ali (husband to Fatima, daughter of the Prophet) and proceeding through twelve Imams, direct descendants of the Prophet who needed to protect their faith against the Sunni majority through *Taqiyya* (secrecy, dissimulation). (In another context and time, James Joyce would make his artist Stephen Dedalus valorize secrecy, silence, exile, and cunning.) So too in Pakistan, this small colony of hybridized Iranians sought to build a distinct culture within a newly formed nation, to deny the effects of history, politics, partition, or time on the timeless truths of Shiia Islam or on the originary myth of Iranian selfhood.

When I argued with anyone about anything, my father would admonish me by saying, "Don't be such a Bengali," and, if I raised my voice, "Don't be an Arab." His model of idealized behavior and identity was constructed out of a multitude of received cultural models from Gandhi to Churchill, from "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck" (which he had to memorize in a Rangoon High School) to the governess in *The Sound of Music*, to my blind, pious, submissive grandmother, and, later, to Mother Teresa. My paternal uncle, another "Ispahani-born" Pakistani, born and raised in the colonies and educated by the British in Burma, thought most natives, particularly Bengalis, were weak and consequently dark-skinned, that his children should marry into the dispersed yet singular Persian community to avoid mongrelization, that Pakistanis could be hierarchically divided from the smaller and darker tribes

to the taller, fairer, and stronger Baluchis, Punjabis, and Pathans. The closer to Iran the tribe, the stronger the breed. His sense of "identity," "difference," and "Other" was narrated within terms made familiar both by Iranian romantic racism and by the Western Imperial imaginary, by the unacknowledged presence of the subcontinental caste systems, and by the dominant historical discourse made available by colonial education that split humanity according to power and color into the strong and the weak, that cast Jews, Hindus, and most natives, particularly the Bengalis, into undifferentiated, stereotyped, and vaguely degenerate Others.

### Diasporic Iranians in America: Discontinuities with Subcontinental Patterns

If the subcontinental patterns my autobiographical account sets up are illustrative of patterns in a long-settled diasporic community, the subjects of this study, interviewed while their memories of revolutionary upheaval were still fresh, reveal some of the dangerous flash points of a community unsettled by the actual and remembered trauma of recent upheaval and violence.

Of the sixty-plus Iranians who participated in this study, seven were children of exiles and expatriates. I was particularly struck by these children, who, for the most part, have no memory of Iran but nonetheless seem to have a fairly clear idea of something essential and different that has been lost and of a nebulous something that must be preserved, that must not simply melt into the generic melting pot of homogenous Americanness.

The children I spoke to articulated most clearly the difference between their postexilic condition and that of other ethnic groups. Their concern was with the representation of Iranians in a media that alienates them from what they imagine to be a larger Iranian community from which they already feel excluded (Sullivan 1992). The response to nonbelonging alternates between clinging more fiercely to family, language, and culture, and a rejection of bonds to a culture that hurts their present. Their fantasy, sometimes, is that of all refugees, expatriates, and exiles who wish to affirm a continuation with a past that they soon discover is lost in reification. The media mutilates what time has already distorted and what history has already revised. Consequently, among the stresses mentioned most often by exiled Iranians and their children are those caused by monolithic representations of Iranian culture and history by a media that seemed, for the decade following the revolution, to persist in reproducing the same images of frenzied crowds in black beating their chests and burning American flags. But that stress is complicated by the shame many express at the recognition that behind the simplified media images, some awful, unnameable, unfilmable destruction was being unleashed in a country that they imagined as devouring its own youth.

Homa Sarshar's son, Houman, told me that although he has no actual memories of Iran, he has been compelled into actions that make him defend a constructed memory of what Iran means: "As a thirteen-year-old, I had to fight my classmates who implied that my father was a terrorist or an exploiter of the masses in Iran." Houman went on trying to explain how he experienced his Iranianness in America in terms of a story. (This too is part of characteristic Iranian conversational behavior: you ask a question and you get a story in response to illustrate an implied answer.)

Let me tell you about Bijan Mofeed's play—*Shahre Qesseh*—about an elephant who enters the land of the camels, jackals, and monkeys, none of whom has ever seen an elephant before. But they try to make him fit into their society. So they cut off his trunk and pull out his teeth and try to fix smaller parts of his anatomy onto his head. But it doesn't work. The elephant is no longer an elephant; neither is he anything else. It's that loss of identity the Iranian fears in America.

Houman's mother, the Iranian journalist Homa Sarshar, had been a successful reporter and translator for Iranian newspapers and magazines for years until 1979, when she was told that she could no longer translate the stories about the Ayatollah because she made the news *najis* (unclean). The fact that she was Jewish was never explicitly named as a reason for disallowing her to translate the news. It was then that to avoid the fate of the elephant in her son's story, she knew she would have to turn in her resignation and leave the country.

I spoke to a Kurd whose village had been destroyed who said, suddenly and unexpectedly at the end of a long narrative, "Maybe Iran is a country that no longer exists." Perhaps in that summary statement is the recognition that the instability of exile is partly caused by separation from a nation and culture that memory has reconstructed first as unity and then as difference. But for the Kurd in Iran, the nation is always "the zone of occult instability," which they have been repeatedly dispossessed of by the whims of regimes who either accept or deny their very existence.<sup>13</sup> A Baha'i who had been compelled into flight after the purge of Baha'is in Shiraz said that the United States was to her a prison from which she longed to escape—to Iran.

What, I wondered, were the sources of nostalgia that collapsed the complex, the different, and the many into one? What was the source of the yearning for the lost land, culture, and people? Why, in a culture that so rigidly splits classes, genders, ideologies, and architectural and personal spaces, should distance effect such a collapse in boundaries? Why would Pari's return to a land divided by war and revolution heal her exilic anxiety and melancholy? What was it in the voices and eyes of the Iranian Hezbollahis that satisfied for a moment the Iranian Baha'i's desire and alleviated the violence of her exile? Why, during the period when the Pahlavi dynasty was on the verge of disintegration, did so many Iranians turn to spirituality and parlor Sufism? Why were my California cousins taking evening classes in the *Shahnameh*?

Where and how and at what points does cultural dispersion hook invisibly and silently into the dream of symmetrical identity? What turns the many into one?<sup>14</sup>

### Cultural Difference: The Many in the One

The self-identity of the Iranians to whom I spoke was often announced in terms of, first, ethnic affiliation and subculture, then family, religion, and country: "I am not a Persian," said Jahan, "I am a Kurd and an Iranian." "We are Azaris," said Abbas Kazemi, "and the language we speak at home and joke in is Turkish, not Farsi." The nostalgia for Iran, however, produced a discourse of unity and shared values in spite of frequent reminders that Azaris, Kurds, Baha'is, and others were groups whose distinctions were blurred in the construction of the nationalist imaginary. Almost all seemed to assume that what connected Iranians to each other and separated them from Americans was, in diaspora, more important than their ethnic differences. While their sense of difference is essentialized, their understanding of differences between Iranians is complex.

What some find more difficult to articulate is the multiplicity of identity interiorized from conflicted and changing cultural, national, and religious sources. Yet many of my subjects (Pari, Mohamad Tavakoli, Tahereh, and Kambys Shirazi, for example) said that rethinking their lives in the course of telling their stories exposed the link between such conflicted origins and the multiple fault lines within their immediate families. Most defined themselves oppositionally or in terms of an *agon*, a struggle—against secular or religious patriarchal authority, or against a particular history, culture, religion, and sense of nation. "Our family culture," said Hamid Naficy, is and continues to be in "opposition to whatever the current regime might be." Many of my informants and their families were harassed or incarcerated by both the Pahlavi and Khomeini regimes. The Azaris and Azarbaijanis directed more hostility toward their Soviet and Russian antagonists than toward the Iranian government; the Kurds directed their anger toward the central state government that has denied them tribal and ethnic rights to identity.

The difference between cultural and national affiliation occurred significantly in several postrevolutionary stories. One that I include is Afsaneh Najmabadi's contrast between the cultural complexity of recognizing, during the Iranian women's march of 1979, the collapse of "Iranian woman" as category, and a later simpler moment of "national shame" when, during the hostage crisis, she encountered a woman wearing a button that read "Let my people go." Memory construes as both whole and one "culture" that is multiply rent, even as Najmabadi unified woman-as-category, but, in her moment of epiphany, saw what she had imagined as whole to be fragmented. Her shock

at recognizing the unexpected fusion between class and religious rage also opened a new space for difference and exile *within* her own culture.

Far from being homogenous, the revolutionary class was a fractured category split between such symbolic points as the conservative Right (the bazaar) and the radical Right (Jalal Al-e-Ahmad in one of his phases); the Islamic Left (Mojahedin, Ayatollah Taleqani, and Ali Shariati) and the Islamic Right (Hezb Jomhoori Islami, the Ayatollahs Shariat Madari and Khomeini); and finally, a three-way split among the nationalist Right (the Shah), the nationalist Left (Fadayaan, the National Front), and the nationalist Islamics (Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani).<sup>15</sup>

"We need fathers to follow," said one exile, "but, as in the *Shahnameh*, fathers betray their sons." Iranian people, she said, have often looked to saviors to deliver them from the chaos of history. The twentieth-century figures mentioned most often by my interviewees were those who helped constitute the contradictory and conflicted national imaginary—figures as varied as Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, Reza Shah, the writer Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, the popular prime minister Mossadeq, or the philosopher and sociologist Ali Shariati. Each of these figures is a paradox whose heroism lies in the charismatic links he creates between the secular and the religious, between selfhood and selflessness, combining anticolonial, sometimes nationalist desires for autonomy with mystic Sufi celebrations of ascetic transcendence. Some are figures whose deaths have been directly caused (Nuri) or indirectly suspected to have been caused (Shariati) by the State.

## The Untranslatability of Cultural Difference

When I asked one of the younger Iranians, Houman Sarshar, what it meant to be "Iranian," what made him different from other groups in the United States, he described it as "a way of caring for others. . . . which brings up a whole series of concepts in Persian culture which are untranslatable—concepts like *ta'arof* and *roodarvarsi*." Every foreigner who has lived in Iran is alternately bewildered and charmed by certain modes of social behavior, the most elaborate and striking of which is *ta'arof*. A word impossible to translate and therefore perhaps a key to the untranslatability of culture, the Urdu version is *takallof*. *Ta'arof* refers to the unwritten laws of elaborate civility in which words and behavior relate metaphorically to meaning. It is used when one greets friends and strangers. It refers to the kind of courtesy in which no guest, no matter how unwelcome, can feel anything but welcome in your house. It means that you will greet guests with a ritual set of verbal gestures that imply your deference to the status of the guest; these include such statements as "please place your feet upon my eyes." "The guest," says a Persian proverb, "is God's beloved" (the Sanskrit variation says "The Guest

is God"). It therefore means that any house you enter will always welcome you with at least a cup of tea and something sweet (if only *nabaat*), that you will at first refuse and then, when coaxed, accept.

Michael Fischer tells the postrevolutionary story of Nurullah Akhtar-Khavari placing a piece of *nabaat* (rock sugar) in the mouths of each of the villagers who broke into his house before taking him to prison during the roundup of Baha'is in Shiraz, and of him placing a piece of *nabaat* into the mouth of his executioner thanking him for what he was about to do (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 249). His gesture too may be read as *ta'arof*, its aim to insist on civility in a situation that was unimaginably barbaric, unjust, and cruel. *Ta'arof* means that a beggar eating a piece of bread will offer it to you with the simple word *befarmayid*, and it means that you will with equal courtesy say *noush-e-jan* ("may it nourish your soul") and imply refusal. It means that we understand the process of civilization to be a series of gestures toward the impossible—toward connection, restraint, cohesion, and communication, that the reality of actual connections is hard, but that these gestures, accessible to all because the phrases are metaphoric and figural, allow us, if only for a moment, to feel part of a recognizably familiar configuration, and therefore safe.

It also means that it can take longer for two people to pass through a simple doorway in Iran than in most other parts of the globe. And gift-giving is part of the complex unarticulated code of *ta'arof*. Awkward social problems therefore occur when a newcomer into that society doesn't know the rules: at Damavand College for Women where I taught, we needed to warn new teachers from the United States to watch out for the consequences of compliments. We told them urban legends of Americans walking into Iranian tea parties and walking out with priceless Persian rugs. One teacher walked into class the first day and came out with a new pair of earrings—the result of telling a student she liked the earrings. She had yet to learn that in the art of *ta'arof*, the instant Persian response "please take them, they're really yours," requires an equally graceful response that in the course of complimenting the wearer rejects the offer.

My narrative of *ta'arof*, however, like that of Houman's, was chosen to produce a unifying series of stories. But *ta'arof* is much more complicated than I have made it appear. *Ta'arof* and *roodarvasi* (a self-abnegating reticence)—the two terms flagged by Houman to describe Iranian identity—are also codes of behavior produced by a class-conscious, hierarchical society that celebrates certain forms of repression and concealment, and therefore may be read as the manifest level of denied anger and aggression. Clearly there is an alternate way of reading the story of Nurullah Akhtar-Khavari's courteous acceptance of his outrageous arrest and execution. Does one offer ceremonious tokens to the storm troopers coming to arrest you? Can one read *ta'arof* and *roodarvasi* against the grain, as gestures produced by a privileged social class and "naturalized" by the underclass for the preservation of the upper class? To what degree do such formal gestures of courtesy collaborate in the worst excesses of

the state? Paul Vieille, the French sociologist, tells me of living in an Iranian village where villagers used the convoluted courtesy of *ta'arof* to block official designs for development. One of the reasons Iranians take so long to adjust to any other culture, he added, is that they can't apply the same modes of everyday conduct in everyday life. *Ta'arof*, therefore, is more than civility; it is also a multipurpose strategical conduct often designed (unconsciously perhaps) to keep the other at bay, to imprison the other in the gift/countergift exchange, and to impose one's superiority on the other by the enormity of a reception impossible for the other to reciprocate.

When I returned to Iran in 1997, I was led to expect a change in postrevolutionary courtesy: "We have all changed utterly, and that includes our old patterns of hospitality," said a friend. But when I started to pay taxi drivers, every one of them responded with the words "Nothing, thank you, my cab is worth nothing," and then (before the final precise amount) "pay me next time," or, "anything you desire." The revolution had not, as I expected, erased everyday *ta'arof*.

### Remembering Iranian Differences in a World Context

In exploring narrations of displacement, migration, diaspora, and exile, I am interested in the tensions between remembered unity and homogeneity and the changes my informants experience over time in the United States. Our question "What does it mean to be an Iranian?" (*Irooni boodan chi hast?*) raised a series of responses that seemed to announce, as it were, phases in historical consciousness. Their ruminations on continuities between the "essential" past and modernity ranged from those who valorized cultural rituals and cultural cohesion through poetry, history, and geography to one who read racial difference as a sign of elitist, national consolidation and identity, to those who interpreted the constructedness of all identity formations in terms of the fluidity within specific categories of discourse.

To cite an example, in spite of the recurring references to the love of poetry "essential" to Iranian identity, even that passion for poetry has not passed unchallenged within its culture.<sup>16</sup> Among the critiques Ahmad Kasravi (the anticlerical intellectual assassinated in 1946 by the Fadayaan-Islami) made on Persian cultural and poetic practice was his *Hasan Is Burning His Book of Hafez*, in which he satirizes the Persian's everyday use of poetry and poetic references as anesthetic against thought. Kasravi, an historian, a jurist, a linguist, and a social reformer, was part of a tradition of intellectuals and moderate theologians who in seeking new ways to open Iran to the West and to modernization grew impatient with cultural obstacles to such "progress." In Persian poetry, for instance, he saw the celebration of human

and political characteristics that he despised. Why waste time with fictions and fabrications when there was work to be done? He therefore organized book-burning festivals at the winter solstice. In place of what he perceived to be the reactionary fatalism of a poetry that celebrated a hierarchy and monarchy of oppression, he preferred to seek secular, social, and political solutions to Iranian cultural problems; the title of one of his pamphlets, *The Best Form of Government Is Constitutional* (Mottahedeh 1985, 104ff), testifies to that practical ideal.

Some of my subjects read the cultural politics of Iranian “difference” in the context of world history—the result of world powers producing difference. During the World War II, for instance, after the Germans had invaded Russia in 1941, the chief alternate route into Russia was through Iran. When the Allies insisted on Iran expelling Germans and entering their war, Reza Shah chose connections with the Germans and abdication (some say he was forced) over occupation. Two of my interviewees still idealized the Aryan bond between Persians and Germans, and one (Soheyl) recalled seeing pictures of Nazi leaders decorating the walls of his cousin’s bedroom. The combination of geography and the history of successive invasions also accounts, some claimed, for the country’s defensive and xenophobic character.

Other narratives read the trauma of twentieth-century Iran as the troubled birth of a modern nation in spite of theocratic resistances to secular modernization. The story of Reza Shah, who was both cherished and hated for his despotic rule and for his autocratic insistence on modernization and independence, is, for most of those with whom I spoke, a paradigm of the contradictory needs of the Iranian people. But when the national ideals of Reza Khan are translated into individual terms, then we see that the “people” too wanted “independence” and freedom from his autocratic will that commanded them, for instance, to drop the veil. The imposition of power from above gave the people the leader they craved, yet necessarily stunted the potential for self-reliance. Although Reza Shah was valorized for his initiative and power (he built roads, hospitals, and schools; purified water; and made trains run on time), it was after his fall that a civil state structure seemed to be in the making.<sup>17</sup>

Reza Shah’s son, Mohammad Reza Shah, was read by most of my interviewees as the weak son of a strong father. Centering political power in the court, he instituted many economic and educational reforms; witnessed the growing distrust of the clergy, the students, and the nonurban masses; and catered to the pretty reading of Iranian history as a seamless tradition of 2,500 years of monarchical rule. This was yet another fiction of coherence to contain what was a turbulent and fragmented society divided between religions, languages, tribes, classes, and ideologies. The central government and monarchy in Iran relied on that illusion of an essential monolithic unity—on the symbolic power of anthems, pageantry, and pomp—to transcend the

fissures in Iranian society. Gradually, however, in its quest for transcendent symbols, the monarchy severed itself from the very social groups that had given it power and in so doing claimed a symbolic divinity (the Shah in his celebration of 2,500 years of Persian monarchy) that doomed it to terminal isolation and to revolt by the very masses that once supported it.

If revolution can be read as the return of the repressed, what the Shah's government repressed consistently were two groups—the clergy (both traditional and radical) and the Left. Isolated, the clergy looked for support and found it in the many leftist organizations that had well-articulated principles of revolt. The naiveté of the Left (and Hannah Arendt may be cited as one of its Western theorists<sup>18</sup>) lay in its conviction that revolution was inevitably secular. The unlikely forces, whose distinctions were strategically blurred, that came together to form the revolution were not only the Left and the clergy, but the radical and the conservative positions (respectively) of Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini. I will have more to say about Shariati in my introduction to Chapter 3, Revolution.

The discourse of the radical and liberal philosophers and theologians that led up to the Islamic Revolution, by providing a counterdiscourse, replaced one set of myths, one idea of nation for another. But the hybridized audience that constituted the apparently unified black-robed marchers on the streets of Tehran, according to my friends who were among them, were anything but unified in their understanding of what the revolution represented. The face of the revolution—as witnessed by the changing stamps produced weekly in Iran—was the changing face of Iran's many heroes from the progressive Ali Shariati and Mossadeq to the conservative Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri. The revolution became a *tabula rasa* on which could be mapped all manner of fantasy and desire.<sup>19</sup>

Like the revolution and the nation that changed continually, so too our narration of self is a mediated story always in a state of improvisation, "fictions that we employ," as Rosemary George puts it, "to feel at home" (1996, 170). This is particularly true of identities in exile or diaspora whose relation to homeland and their new nation shifts with the multiple channels on the evening news, as new histories and new social movements transform reformers into reactionaries, allies into adversaries, and the exiled into the exalted. Twelve years after the revolution, exiled playwrights and filmmakers in California began to protest film festivals from the Islamic Republic with marches and counterfestivals as the exiles took it upon themselves to contest the politics of art that, in its very production, sanctified the brutalities of the Republic. At the same time Iranian newsletters published in the United States through the 1990s headlined "The Exile Iranian Political Opposition as the Endangered Species" by publishing lists of assassinated Iranian leaders of that opposition. And as the meaning of exile has been transformed on domestic and foreign ground, so too has it been contested in virtual space as the internet

opens a new place for the homeless to find homes and for Iranians to contest diverse positions on *vatan parasti* (homeland worship), *vatan doosti* (love of homeland), or *vatan foroushi* (betrayal/selling of homeland).<sup>20</sup>

We live our lives, as the Bible reminds us, as a tale told, and the tales we tell have to do with fashioning a gendered self as part of or in opposition to a collective unit. The process of telling who we are, however, changes when people are suddenly removed from the group. When the received story of relation between the self and the collective breaks down, the process of telling who we are continues in a new circumstance. Although some forge identities out of the debris of loss, my narrators suggest that all stories of new belonging are not told from positions of powerlessness and alienation, that sometimes new stories are told to recapture new power interests, newly-imagined alternative gender and national identities, or multivoiced artistic expressions (comedic plays, films, and journals) that challenge, reconfigure, and subvert traditional cultural affiliations. What follows are the interrupted narratives of self, nation, and belonging, new stories that begin to be told in the new circumstance of exile, migration, or diaspora when we see people knitting the story of themselves with the story of the collective after it has been torn apart.