

Transcultural Identity Formation and the Iranian Diaspora: Writing/Speaking Back in Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity*

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Abstract

While much has been written on the relation between identity and migration as well as the inconsistent meaning of belonging, little attention has been paid to Iranian migrant women and their influence on the changing meaning of transcultural citizenship. This study focuses on Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity* and analyses Iranian female characters depicted in the novel, Roya in particular, in light of theories of Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. This article deals with the fluidity of cultural identity, bilingualism, and the role of narratives as productive and emancipatory forces in helping diasporas change their position from victimisation to consciousness. The character Roya Saraabi spends a few years as a refugee in Afghanistan and India, then goes to Houston in the USA with her daughter Tala. This article discusses the multiplicity of selves and argues that Iranian migrant women's transcultural hybrid identity, intellectual bilingualism, and diasporic narratives increase their transnational mobility, help them maintain their free existence, and allow them to question the stereotypical categorisation and national, cultural, and identitarian boundaries.

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Keywords

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Introduction

Farnoosh Moshiri's (1951-) novel *Against Gravity* (2006) depicts the experience of immigration and displacement from three different perspectives: one from that of an Iranian immigrant woman, and the two others from those of two American men – a philosophy professor and a social worker – whose description of Roya represents the Western conception of non-Western people. This novel depicts the life of an Iranian immigrant in the heart of America and informs American readers about different aspects of Iranian history and culture. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, many Iranians found themselves unable or unwilling to continue their life in their homeland and decided to leave Iran and settle in countries in Europe and the United States. The life condition of these Iranian immigrants was different from the situation of those Iranian migrants who came to America before the revolution. Before the Islamic revolution, when Iran and America had normal diplomatic relations, Iranians migrated to America for different reasons, such as employment and educational opportunities, and could return to their country whenever they wished. After the revolution, “the two erstwhile allies became bitter enemies” (Karim and Khorrami 15), and it drastically affected Iranian diasporas who left their country, hoping to find a safe haven in the United States. Many Iranian immigrants left their country, especially during the years after the 1979 revolution, to find a secure home in America. However, they found that their adopted homeland is not much hospitable as they had anticipated, particularly after the Iran-Iraq war and the 1979-1981 hostage crisis. The hardship of the Iranian diaspora was intensified after the events of 9/11, as the West feared the “‘other’ perhaps as never before” (Brinkerhoff 1). In describing Iranian identity, the words mostly attributed to them included but were not limited to

Ayatollah, Khomeini, extremism, hostages, anti-American, war, oil, mean people, dark skin, terrorism, religious, poverty, Muslim, strict, fanatical, ‘Not Without My Daughter’, sand, Arabs, death, hated, Saddam Hussein, Iran-Contra missiles, and oppression.
(Fotouhi 81-2)

Assigning stereotypes to the migrants, the Western propaganda “reduces a multifaceted group to a monolithic ‘Other’” (Jongelen 12). Western media, as McAuliffe argues, produce “an essentialised and monolithic Muslim Iranian Other” (31) and “photographs and illustrations that accompany articles about Iran often construct an inscrutable Muslim threat” (33). Referring to the misogynistic portrayal of Islam, Hasan states that “Muslim women asserting their

identity and speaking for themselves seemed oxymoronic or inconceivable,” contending that “even the educated and empowered among them are seen as ignorant and oppressed” (“Seeking Freedom” 93). An example of such categorisation relevant to Iranian migrants in the United States was President George W. Bush’s use of the “Axis of Evil metaphor” (Heradstveit and Bonham 421), which declared Iran to be part of the Axis involved in the 9/11 World Trade Center terrorist attacks in 2001.

Putting her female protagonist, Roya Saraabi, in the heart of America, Farnoosh Moshiri tries to educate Americans – whether the fictional American characters, Madison Kirby, and Ric Cardinal, or her American readers – and represent a real picture of Iranian people, history, and culture. This exile narrative is representative of the author, Moshiri, who was one of the first generation of Iranian-American intellectuals to write and tell their life stories and experiences shared by many other Iranian-Americans and they encouraged other Iranian-Americans to do the same. Iranian diasporic women writers recount their life stories to show the Americans what Iranian culture means, reflect upon the stereotypical and controlling images of women in both their homeland and host land, and engage in political and social affairs. Their literature is “engaged with what have become the most timely topics of the day: immigration, exile, religious fundamentalism, and women’s rights” (Darznik, *Writing* 2). These narratives focus on cultural differences and social displacement, as migrants find themselves between two different worlds and encounter new things.

Iranian diasporic women writers and their literature should not be assumed as existing outside Western literature, but they occupy a unique position between the Middle East and the West, serving as a bridge between these two distanced regions. This position of in-betweenness is a good source of diasporic writers’ power, which enables them to be critical of the economic, cultural, and political system of both the host country and the homeland in ways native authors are unable. When Iranian women immigrate to another country, they experience transnationalism because they “go beyond remittances, and involve more political forms of intervention and identification” (Noor 3). Transnationalism allows them to “create social fields that cross national boundaries” (Basch 27). It is in this transnational network that “different physical and virtual positions and actions overlap, enabling the construction and negotiation of identities and interactions among Iranians all over the world” (Ghorashi and Boersma 687). Caught up in cultural liminality, these writers blend the two cultures and criticise both. These women, as Jasmin Darznik explains, have experienced two kinds of culture:

a native culture which has traditionally sanctioned neither women's freedom to travel nor women's autobiographical writing, and an adopted culture with an insatiable curiosity for both the intimate details of their lives and descriptions of forbidden and alien landscape. (“The Perils and Seductions” 56)

The relation between diasporic Iranian women and transnationalism has been rarely studied. Jasmin Darznik indicates that Iranian immigrant women were “largely ignored through the eighties and nineties,” and the “increased attention to Iranian women’s writing [in the post-9/11 period] has not yet yielded a corresponding body of literary scholarship” (*Writing* 1). Based on this background, this article focuses on Iranian female characters in Moshiri’s novel and studies the struggles of diasporic Iranian women to manage their life and create their identity. This study is in the tradition of diaspora criticism and is informed by the ideas and theories of Stuart Hall. Hall’s interest in social movements, ideology, and hegemony is expressed in his analysis of the construction of cultural identity. According to Hall, identities are always in the process of transformation, “a ‘production’, which is never complete” (222). In his discussion of cultural identity, Hall emphasises the importance of the context, “a particular place and time, from a history and a culture” in which our enunciations and representations are “*positioned*” (222).

Working on Iranian migrant women’s transcultural hybrid identity, this article explores Moshiri’s novel also in light of Homi Bhabha’s theories of identity formation, hybridity, in-betweenness, liminality, and belonging in the context of exile and migration. Infusing “thinking about nationality, ethnicity, and politics with poststructuralist theories of identity and indeterminacy,” Bhabha argues that “nationalities, ethnicities, and identities are dialogic, indeterminate, and characterized by ‘hybridity’” (Leitch et al. 2377). Bhabha believes that the “colonized, the immigrants and other minorities experience the situation of being in the hybrid space” (Ghandeharion and Sheikh-Farshi 494). The focus of this study is on Moshiri’s depiction of diasporic Iranian women in the context of transnationalism and hybrid identity development to see their relationship with their homeland and the host country, their sociocultural engagement, their struggle to manage their life despite the oppression they face, and their attempt to pursue their rights through their life narratives.

Transculturalism and hybrid identity

Two significant concepts in the study of migrant literature are transculturalism and in-betweenness. Culture is an ongoing and open-ended discussion in diaspora studies, and there is a close and everlasting relation between culture and diaspora identity. Culture, as Avtar Brah explains, can be defined as “the whole spectrum of experiences, modes of thinking, feeling and behaving; about the values, norms, customs and traditions of the social group(s) to which we feel we belong” (19). According to the definition given by John W. Pulis, culture is “a site where hegemonic forms [are] contested, where older and traditional forms [are] renegotiated, and where new or emergent forms [are] invented” (2). When diasporas leave their homeland to settle in another country, they are confronted

with a new, dominant culture. On the other hand, diasporas bring some portions of the culture they inherit from their home and try to

employ the host's popular culture and its mediating institutions to create a symbolic *communitas* and an economy based on descent and consent relations, in which certain fossilized representations of home and the past are repeatedly circulated and reinforced.

(Naficy 34)

Cultural capital is what diasporas bring with themselves. This confrontation with new cultures happens in a transcultural state or the 'contact-zone', in which, as Mary Louise Pratt explains, "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). This encounter with "newness," in Bhabha's words, "is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation" (*The Location of Culture* 7). These migrants act as ambassadors and represent the culture of their homelands in a different context. In Moshiri's novel, Roya left her home and its culture to start a new life in a new country with new values and cultural practices. Experiencing what Hall calls the diasporic experience of "heterogeneity and diversity" (235), she tried to forget what she had left behind because she believed that in order to build a new life and identity for herself, it was necessary to forget the previous "countries," "images," "faces," and "people" (Moshiri 143). However, reminiscences of Iranian culture remain with her, as seen in her behaviour, especially in her relationship with foreigners and male friends. For example, when Madison persisted that they become close friends, Roya could not call him by his first name and explains that it was rooted back to the culture of her homeland: "I'm sorry. It's hard for me to get used to first names. Back home we don't call people by their first names, unless we become very close" (Moshiri 43). Again, when Madison gave her an expensive gift – the earrings Roya liked – she did not accept it and, in order not to be offensive, said: "Maybe it's a cultural thing. Women don't accept such gifts without—" (Moshiri 46). She is caught between the two cultures, experiencing what Bhabha calls "the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (*The Location of Culture* 13), and tries to bridge her home and the West.

For diasporic communities, the culture of their homelands is very important, and it is assumed as a link or connection to their birthplaces. Their ties with their homeland and its culture are exhibited through "transnational interaction between individuals who live in the hostland with individuals who reside in the homeland" (Laguerre 18). This transnational interaction helps them maintain their attachment. During her movements between countries, Roya never lost her connection with her sister, Mali, who sent her money every month when she was in India, helped her emotionally, and encouraged her to continue her studies. Iranian women in the diaspora, even those who were born in America, try to maintain their ties with their heritage and culture through their families,

friends, and relatives. In Moshiri's novel, Roya searched for her family members in the character of her American friends. Bobby Palomo, an American, reminded Roya of her brother, Hamid, and "gave [her] the same kind of attention" (Moshiri 137). Marlina Haas, Madison's doctor who became Roya's classmate and her friend in the dance class, reminded Roya of her sister, Mali:

She was another Mali and reminded me of my sister all the time.

It was as if I needed a Mali figure again in my life to tell me what was good for me and what was not. (Moshiri 184)

Living in a new country, migrants experience a "hybrid" state of being. In this situation, the migrants figure out the differences between themselves and their new surroundings and recognise the necessity of "difference" and "hybridity" in their identities, "which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 235). They come to an awareness that the culture they confront is "in no full sense their own" (Lane 79). The immigrants' struggle to create diaspora communities leads to the development of what Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* calls "a hybrid cultural space" (7) that contains elements from the cultures and values of both the host countries and the homelands. Caught between two distinct cultures, diasporic subjects "possess cultural bifocality" (Brodwin 55). Their "political views and practices" are different from those of their homeland and the host land because of their "double loyalty... to both the country of origin and the country of residence" (Laguerre 130). Iranian diaspora women, as Anila Noor indicates, "feel a loss of identity as they can neither detach themselves from Iran nor adore their host land as a home" (34). The identity of Iranian diasporic women is not separable from issues of religion, gender, and place. They would consider themselves Muslim women (religious identity), or Iranian women (national identity), or Western women (new national identity). In addition, their identity is susceptible to the culture in which they reside.

The identity of a diaspora is not fixed, but, in Hall's words, it is "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process" (222). In *Against Gravity*, Moshiri deals with the changing meanings of identity, insisting on the instability of the nature of identity. In part two, Roya recalls that she found in the Professor's room a book titled *The Autobiography of My Former Self* (Moshiri 115), which later the Professor gave to her. This book was written by the Professor in which he narrates his childhood, his experience of the revolutions in Iran and Russia, his travels to Europe, and his return with a new name and identity. When Roya began to write her memoir, she "felt more like telling someone else's story with a detached narrative" (Moshiri 124). In her previous life in her homeland, Roya did not have hope for life, and identity meant nothing to her: "The days had no identity.... I had no motivation. No hope" (Moshiri 112). As she argues, anything which happened to her in her previous life did not make her weep because they were all unreal:

I hadn't cried in prison when I was violated, had held back my tears when the jailers handed me my brother's bloody shirt, had no tears when my husband's corpse returned from the front, didn't shed tears for Pari and the Professor.... It was as if those incidents were not real.... Prison and war were not the scenes of my real life—I'd stepped on a stage to act and I was to perform the role of a brave and strong woman and I'd done my best. (Moshiri 161)

Her previous identities – when she was in Iran, Afghanistan, and India – were not real, and it was as if she acted on a scene. She was a young woman, in her twenties, when she decided to leave her country. In that age, one must have maximum energy, motivation, and hope, but Roya experienced the challenges of exile, loneliness, and isolation. She was not sure about her identity – her past, present, and future identity – and her future probable love relationship: “I didn't know who I was, who I would become, and who would ever love me” (Moshiri 114). In America, Roya tried to find and create her new identity. To do so, she decided to start a new life in the United States, and English-language proficiency helped her to progress, find a job, and become part of American life. In the novel, bilingualism is highlighted as a tool that can impede the feelings of loneliness and invisibility.

Bilingual intellectuals in *Against Gravity*

The way the Iranian diaspora is represented in the Western media impedes their visibility and recognition. This state of invisibility that the Iranian diaspora experiences is related to “a prolonged lack of recognition from... host countries” (Fotouhi 85), which intensifies and contributes to their sense of unhomeliness. This lack of recognition stems from the gap and the difference between the diasporic subject and the new environment, and the process by which this subject becomes “other” and different. As Paul Gilroy argues, the reason of xenophobia and hatred of immigrants is rooted in misunderstanding the Other's difference:

New hatreds and violence arise not, as they did in the past, from supposedly reliable anthropological knowledge of the identity of the Other, but from the novel problem of not being able to locate the Other's difference in the commonsense lexicon of alterity. (qtd. in Turner 65)

The host country can recognise the diasporic subject, who has been regarded as ‘other’ hitherto, only when it can find something familiar in that subject. Kelly Oliver proposes that “through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects” (7). For Iranian writers in America, using the English language is the best choice in the process of becoming “speaking subjects” since it is spoken in the host country and can facilitate the possibility of

their recognition and acknowledgment. Therefore, when they decide to write, as Farideh Goldin indicates, they “adopt the language of the countries that have adopted them” (qtd. in Hillmann 3). Practicing what Bhabha calls the “secret art of Invisibleness,” they begin to disrupt the “polarities or binarisms in identifying the exercise of power” (*The Location of Culture* 53). Through this hybrid writing, the writer fills the gap between the two cultures, familiarising different incidents that happen in Iranian society. This hybridity, which shifts the “forces and fixities” and reverses “the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha, “Signs” 154), provides Western readers with insight into the Iranian way of life so that they recognise Iranian people as individuals, like themselves, with the same problems and pressures they confront in life, not as stereotyped and invisible characters.

The opportunity that the bilingual position offers the writers – to have access to both rhetorical systems and cultures – encourages most diasporic writers to learn other languages. That is why many Iranian diasporic writers prefer writing in other languages, notably English. The Persian language would be a barrier that limits the interaction between the Iranian diaspora and others in the host land since it is among “minority languages [which are] viewed as a sign of backwardness and [are] strongly discouraged” (Herbert 142). On the other hand, the English language helps diasporic Iranian women call for women’s rights and attract international support. One of these authors who wrote in languages other than Persian is Marjane Satrapi (1969-), whose autobiographical work, *Persepolis*, a graphic novel, was originally published in French in 2000. Another example is Farnoosh Moshiri, who wrote her novel *Against Gravity* in the English language when she was in the United States.

Roya realised the importance of language in writing and decided to choose the English language in order to be read and heard: “I realized that even if I finished the book, no one could read it in Farsi” (Moshiri 124). Not knowing the English language would produce many difficulties for diasporic people as they “[can] not speak English, [can] not say who they really were, who they had been” (Moshiri 284). In Afghanistan, Roya, Simin, and Pari “listened to the music of other lands” with a transistor radio, and because of lack of recognising the song and tunes, they “felt lonely and sad” (Moshiri 104). The importance of language in Roya’s life was to such an extent that she realised that she “had to begin dreaming in English” (Moshiri 143). Knowing other languages helped her find a job and work as a translator at a radio station in Afghanistan. Having an appropriate job is one of the significant concerns of the immigrants since it provides “the possibility of enhancing family wealth and economic success” (Herbert 148). When she was in Kabul, she began to learn other languages, such as German and Russian, “so counting [her] native Farsi, English, and French, [she] knew five languages” (Moshiri 107). In America, she worked as a translator, translating “the text of foreign news into Farsi” (Moshiri 109).

Bilingualism, more specifically English proficiency, is an indicator of the immigrants' education, which is regarded as their source of power and helps them to increase their employment opportunities, engage in political/economic affairs, and enhance their social status in the host country. Among different influential factors, education is known "as the most important determinant of economic success" since "higher levels of education are related to higher labour force participation, higher earnings and higher occupational status" (Der-Martirosian 39). As Peter McCarthy explains, "[I]mmigrant workers... do not have the same access to information or financial means as their new First World brethren," and they need these intellectuals to "come to their assistance in military-like 'actions' and 'engagements'" (105). Moshiri elucidates the power of knowledge and education in Madison's statement: "I impressed him when I lectured on Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. My little power was in the big books that I had read and he hadn't" (Moshiri 25). Madison's description of Roya's desk, "covered with books and papers" (Moshiri 28), shows her interest in education. She was interested in literature and poetry and wrote her memoir. As she claims, when she was in exile, "reading had become [her] only pleasure" (Moshiri 115). When she was in the depth of despair and pain, studying was her "only activity—work and leisure in one" (Moshiri 130).

In *Against Gravity*, Moshiri refers to different philosophical and literary figures and their works and ideas such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and his existentialism, Plato and his theory of Forms, Henry James's (1843-1916) life and works, D. H. Lawrence's (1885-1930) poems, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), and Miguel de Cervantes's (1547-1616) *Don Quixote*, among others, to stress the significance of education and knowledge in the promotion of an immigrant's status in the host country. Roya's success in her education ended with her acceptance of a PhD programme and, of her tuition, as "PAC was planning to give her a scholarship" (Moshiri 74). The shared characteristic of Roya and Madison, which bridges the gap between them and connects them, is that they were both educated and raised in an intellectual family. Both had professor fathers, and, as Roya confesses, sometimes Madison "reminded [Roya] of [her] father" (Moshiri 136). Two other Iranian women who accompanied Roya in Zabol in Iran and in the camp in Afghanistan – Simin and Pari – were also educated women, a doctor and a teacher, respectively. In Kabul, these three intellectual women had gatherings at night and discussed political issues, analysing "the situation of the world" (Moshiri 110). Not only these women but also other refugees in Kabul, "who had crossed the same border as [Roya and her friends] had, were the best brains of [her] land" (Moshiri 113). Their education helped them to work in Afghanistan: "Simin worked in the women's hospital and Pari taught in the camps' elementary school" (Moshiri 104). Simin was a doctor and believed that "she could be a doctor anywhere in the world" (Moshiri 105) and Roya was "among political

leaders, writers, artists, and historians” (Moshiri 113). Roya was interested in literature and had a degree in comparative literature and wished she could continue her education in this field and enter a doctoral programme. Roya’s interest in literature was to the extent that “she had a small Rilke book that she read whenever she was tired of her stupid, tedious job” (Moshiri 42). She also wrote memoirs when she was in exile. The desire to write/talk back among marginalised women is not a new trend, but the possibility of being read/heard is new. As an exiled Iranian woman, Roya chose hybrid writing as a way to reconstruct her identity and regain her lost sense of home.

The liberating potential of counter-narratives

“Every regime of representation,” in Hall’s words, “is a regime of power” (225-6), and diasporic Iranian women, who come from a Muslim country, are subject to Orientalist representations and stereotypes about Iranians. These Orientalist representations, whether through “*manifest* Orientalism” or “*latent* Orientalism,” dwell on the weakness, inferiority, despotism, “backwardness,” and “eccentricity” of eastern societies (Said 206). In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said discusses the binary oppositions related to the tensions between the West and the East, such as Occident/Orient, Self/Other, civilised/barbarians, and feminism/antifeminism. Orientalist discourse, “characterized by the distorted, stereotyped and decontextualized view of the East by the West” (Maggi 90), is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). What is rife in Orientalist discourse is “[h]omogenizing non-western societies and women and then essentializing them without appreciating the cultural differences” (Hasan, “Orientalization” 29). Shahnaz Khan asserts that even “those who romanticized and valued the Orient were part of this ‘othering’ and homogenizing” (4). Working on diasporic Muslim women living in America, Khan investigates the Orientalist categorisations of Iranian women immigrants in her interview with fourteen Muslim women from different Islamic countries, including Iran.

Iranian immigrants experience Orientalism, which links them to “elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien” (Said 207). It is impossible to have recognition of and contact with the “difference and otherness” without “the assimilation of difference into something familiar” (Oliver 9). Diasporic writers narrate their life stories and give a full and clear picture of their exilic life. Using the act of writing as one of the “cultural practices and forms of representation” (Hall 222), these writers depict contradictory states of the diasporic life such as self and other, home and away, and assimilation and individuation. According to Bhabha, migrants’ survival depends upon their trial to use their “mixed media works to make a hybrid cultural space that forms contingently, disjunctively, in the inscription of signs of cultural memory and sites

of political agency” (*The Location of Culture* 7). These writers try to “transform their experience of cultural schizophrenia into a restorative dream of home, a healing myth of origin, or a consolatory lyric combining diverse melodies” (Boehmer 112). This combination of diverse melodies, that is, different languages and cultures, constructs a transcultural or hybrid space of belonging.

In the end of the twentieth century, the production and popularity of diaspora literature – especially memoirs and life narratives – in the United States increased. This period, with the explosion of autobiographical writing, witnessed “memoir boom” (Naghibi 175). That is why this period is called the period of the “wave of expatriate narratives” (Singh 147) or the era of the “explosion of women’s memoirs” (Karim 153). During this period, a lot of memoirs were published, among them Abbas Milani’s *Tales of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir* (1996), in which the author narrates his childhood in Iran up to his immigration to the United States. Milani’s work revolves around the issues of imprisonment, exile, loss of identity, in-betweenness, and hybrid identity. Seven years after the publication of Milani’s memoir, Firoozeh Dumas’ humorous autobiography *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up in America* (2003) was published. Dumas writes of immigration, hybrid culture and personality, culture shock, and identity crisis. One of the important characteristics of the literature – whether fiction or life narrative – written by diasporic writers is that it is not just a representation of their exilic life or a description of their host country, but it creates “a space ‘in-between’, blending [two cultures] and commenting on both from a unique position and perspective” (Jongenelen 10).

The fiction of the Iranian diaspora consists of two parts: “‘American stories’—experiences of cultural alienation and adjustment—and ‘Iranian stories’—tales of home, be they fondly nostalgic or post-traumatic” (Ostby 308). Moshiri’s “narratives of displacement” (Hall 223) are mostly “infused with a sense of politics, induced by exile or literal imprisonment, especially relating to women” (Wright 67). Her collection of short stories, *The Crazy Dervish and the Pomegranate Tree* (2004), consists of stories set in both Iran and America and narrates the diasporic characters’ experience of torment, imprisonment, exile, and loss of identity. Moshiri’s second novel, *The Bathhouse* (2003), narrates the struggle and torments of the female protagonist, who is arrested and prisoned because of her brother’s political activism. Similarly, *Against Gravity* contains themes of “imprisonment, torture, execution, and exile during the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran” (Khalili 187). In this novel, Moshiri “blurs the line between autobiography and fiction, which subtly distinguishes her from other contemporary authors” (Jongenelen 8).

Diasporic female writers mostly describe their life stories and exilic experiences. As authors or female protagonists in the novel, they use writing and self-narratives to search for their true self and resist the false stereotypes ascribed to them by the world around them. When she was in Kabul, Roya began to write

“a daily journal,” in which she recorded her daily activities and experiences in the camp and hoped that it would become her “second book” (Moshiri 120). The Professor always encouraged her to write her memoir and make it a book. Even when she was not in Kabul, she could hear the voice of the Professor echoing in her head, “Write it! Make it a book!” (Moshiri 124). Her conversations with the Professor were mostly around the issue of literature. They read books and poetry and analysed them together. They conducted many literary activities and published their works together, including translating a selection of Rilke’s poetry from German to Farsi (Persian), which has been published “under a fake name—a combination of [their] names” (Moshiri 120). These literary discussions and the Professor’s comments became inspiration for Roya’s future writings.

When Roya wanted to attract the “one-eyed bearded man,” whom she called “the Pirate,” and keep him for herself, she knew that telling her story could fascinate him: “I’d tell my long story, like Sheherezade, night after night after night, and this way, I’d keep him with me” (Moshiri 146). Diasporic storytelling as a means of survival is comparable to the myth of Scheherazade and her oral storytelling that was ordered by the Sultan to be written down at the end of *The Thousand and One Night*. Roya’s daughter, Tala, also became a writer, and her writing fascinated the young creative writing teacher. When she became a teenager, Tala insisted on being called T.S., resembling T.S. Eliot’s name. She wrote about what she could remember, narrating her childhood experiences of travel with her mother through different countries, the hardships they endured, and what she learned in this new place (America), that is, “the shooting game” (Moshiri 304). Steven and Maya asked Roya to speak and tell her life story in front of rich people during the “Christmas fund-raising party” (Moshiri 174), which they held every year. These rich people denoted money and supported the PAC, “People’s Aid Center” (Moshiri 74), and Roya was asked to impress them with her life story. She was shocked and could not believe that she might one day become a public speaker because someone “had killed [her] voice when [she] was a child” (Moshiri 186). Although at first Roya did not agree, thinking that she could not speak in public, she succeeded in talking “in front of one hundred affluent Houstonians [to] impress them so much that they’d open their purses and give money to PAC” (Moshiri 186). In this way, she began to participate in social and transnational networks and share her personal experiences.

Conclusion

For diasporic Iranian women, who are in search of their lost identity and experience the feeling of unhomeliness, the most helpful approach is to formulate a definition of identity. The significance of the title, *Against Gravity*, can be seen through Roya’s struggle against the gravity of the situation and her resistance to the burden imposed upon her as a woman in the diaspora, living on the fringes of society. As Dr. Haas, Madison’s doctor, indicates, in order to defy death, one

must “defy gravity” (Moshiri 56). Marlina’s theory of gravity, which she used in ballet dancing classes, is also indicative of how a person should control her body, breath, soul, and attitude towards life. For Roya, her opposition to the gravity during the ballet dancing classes symbolises her resistance to oppression. Focusing on the female diasporic characters of Moshiri’s novel, this article has studied the struggle of diasporic Iranian women against gravity, against injustice, against oppression, against the feeling of unhomeliness, and against their lost identity.

This research has argued that bilingualism and transcultural identity development play a critical role in promoting the status of diaspora communities. Language is the medium through which diasporic writers become speaking subjects, communicate with the world, and construct their new distinct identities. Hybrid language is a significant element in the process of transculturalism. Iranian diasporic writers in America, who are in-between the two cultures and experience the contact zone, can be critical of the limitations of both cultures and their hegemonic ideologies. They are within and without both cultures. As they are part of both cultures, they cannot identify with either of them since they are despised by both, and this distance allows them to be critical of the cultural limitations of both countries.

Diasporic Iranian women who turn to creative writing can empower themselves to build the bridge between the West and the ‘Other’ and familiarise the difference. Through their diasporic narratives, whether written or spoken, they engage in social networks, connect with co-ethnic diasporas, and foster cosmopolitanism. The literature written by the Iranian immigrants should be considered not outside the host culture and the homeland tradition but within both. Their reflection on the political, economic, and social issues of their homeland and the host country can help them to emancipate themselves from the oppressions imposed by both cultures and challenge the stereotypes, racial and gender prejudice, and superstitious cultural expectations. Roya Saraabi (the protagonist) and her creator Farnoosh Moshiri (the author) were among the Iranian diaspora who turned to writing to express their experiences of exile, isolation, marginalisation, exclusion, hybrid identities, and in-betweenness. Thus, they bridged their home culture to the Western conventions and offered insight into marginalised migrant communities that are often stereotyped.

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