

**REPRESENTING THE CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN WOMAN: A READING OF  
PARINOUSH SANIEE'S *THE BOOK OF FATE***

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this project is my original work and has not been submitted to any University for a degree award.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my dear husband, Victor Ogeto Onsongo, our daughter Laura Boke Ogeto and anyone else who loves relinquishing new ideas and new ways of thinking.

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* to establish how the contemporary Iranian woman is represented in the novel. The study aims at investigating the depiction of Iranian woman against the historical backdrop of the Islamic Republic of Iran and how the narrative is crafted to narrate these women's experiences. Correspondingly, three hypotheses guide this study. First, Parinoush Saniee narrates Iranian women's experiences against the historical background of Iran, the second one presupposes that the contemporary woman in Iran is represented in *The Book of Fate* and third, there are narrative strategies employed in the text to narrate the Iranian woman's experiences. The argument I advance in this research is that Parinoush Saniee weaves the stories of Iranian women with the colonial history of the nation thus portraying their real-life experiences from an insider point of view, subverting the hegemonic narratives that define them as homogenous categories of powerless victims. Steered by Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak's postulations on postcolonial discourses, this study reveals that the contemporary Iranian woman exists in a hybrid space and that a myriad of factors, ranging from history to economic affect their lives. In this space, the contemporary woman in Iran is an intellectual, visible in both public and private realms, a dedicated wise mother, industrious, pious and a role model. In addition, Gerard Genette's narratological framework aids in evaluating the "how" in the narrative. Admittedly, the study exposes that personal narratives of Iranian women provide the basis for understanding the experiences of women in the Global South.

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## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

The following terms will be used frequently in this research hence calls for explanation at this juncture.

### **Third World**

Over the years, scholars have made attempts to define the term “Third World.” However, the question that continues to linger is, who defines and writes about the “Third World,” What geographical regions constitute the “Third World”? Spivak explains that the term “Third World” was originally coined in the year 1955 by those emerging from the “old” world order (270). In her seminal work, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, (1988) Chandra Mohanty defines the “Third World” geographically as, the nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-east Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania constituting the parameters of the non-European third world (5) that were colonized and whose political and economic structures were deformed during the colonial process. She further elucidates in the preface of *The Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991) that the term “does not merely indicate a hierarchical cultural and economic relationship between “first” and “third” world countries; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonization and contemporary relationships of structural dominance between first and third world people” (x).

Other scholars contend that the term was used to refer to the developing world formerly colonized by the West. The Islamic Republic of Iran, although not formally colonized, falls under this category due to the detrimental effects of imperialism experienced therein which, in my view, are of equal magnitude to colonialism. Although the nation has made significant strides towards

independence, her economy is yet to stabilize. Evidently, all these scholarship attest to the marginality of the “Third World” from the presumed European center.

The term “Third World” is said to have been conceptualized by a French demographer, Alfred Sauvy in 1952 at the height of Cold War. According to Leslie Philips in her Article, “Why Third World?” it applied to the developing nations excluded from the power blocs and belonging to the non-communist world. Marcin Solarz’s article, “Third World: The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of a Concept that Changed History” also pays more attention to the use of the term; its geographical reference to countries in Africa, Asia, Middle East among others and the debates it has raised around the political and socio-economic meaning embedded in it. Marcin further states that the term gained popularity and became one of the most important and expressive concepts of the 20th century. However, with time, the term has strongly been criticized because it perpetuates the binaries of domination of the Western World (First World) and the subordination of the other Eastern (Third World).

Whereas I agree with the opinion that the term “Third World” denotes inferiority and marginality of men and women in the Global South, making them appear to be in constant need of liberation and civilization by the “First World”, studying their experiences against the colonial historical backdrop brings them back to the equilibrium as “Third World” countries have different cultures, therefore one group’s experience cannot be used to pin down or define the other. Therefore, in this study, the term is used interchangeably with Global South.

### **Third World Woman**

Talking about the “Triple Bind” in her work *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Trinh Minh-ha defines the “Third World” Woman as non – white “she who happens to

be a non – white) Third World member, a woman” (6). The concept of “Third World Women” as often used by Western feminists has been critiqued widely. For instance, Mohanty uses the term interchangeably with “women of color” to emphasize the lasting connection between non- Western women with their countries of origin. She argues that “what seems to constitute ‘women of color’ or ‘third world women’ as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications (7). Although she uses the term “third world women,” Mohanty argues that “Western feminisms appropriate the production of the third world woman as a singular monolithic subject,” for a “discursive colonization,” through the production of “third world difference” (51). A “difference” that Trinh Minh-ha argues is an essential division in the understanding of many. In essence, the Western feminism’s use of the category of “Third World” woman and “Third World Difference” perpetuates cultural and economic colonialism. She asserts:

In the context of the hegemony of the Western scholarly establishment in the production and dissemination of texts, and the context of the legitimating imperative of humanistic and scientific discourse, the definition of the ‘third world woman’ as a monolith might well tie into the larger cultural and economic praxis of ‘disinterested’ scientific inquiry and pluralism which are the surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonization of the ‘non-Western’ world (74).

According to Trinh, the “difference” is merely a tool of self – defense and conquest of the “Third World.” Correspondingly, to many white feminists, “Third World” women signaled a perpetual “Other” who lacked resources, education, oppressed and strikingly exotic. These images have however been challenged by many postcolonial feminists arguing for a more specific study of their experiences which this study intends to explore.

## **Feminine**

*The American Heritage Dictionary* online defines feminine as, “of or belonging to the female sex” and femininity as “the quality or condition of being feminine; womanliness”. Although the definition of the term has often proved problematic to many scholars owing to Judith Butler’s postulations about gender performativity, it is notable that women possess innate characteristics that distinguish them from those of men. In this study, the term feminine has been used to mean women who embody feminine traits such as gracefulness, gentleness, empathy, piety and sensitivity as has been stated by Sandra et al., in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979).

## **Woman**

According to *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, “woman” refers to a collective outlook of females who share similar biological, diverse cultural and social circumstances. Due to their similar biological make- up, women have been categorized under one umbrella. This study is however interested in showing how their diverse geographical and cultural inclinations are key in understanding their life experiences.

## **Female**

*Merriam Webster Dictionary* online again defines the term female as “having gender identity that relates to women.” In other words, possessing qualities associated with women. The term “female” as used in this research thus relates to women.

# CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

“There are 22 nations in the Middle East  
Most people in the World are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female, Non – Christian  
And do not speak English  
By the Year 2000, the 20 largest cities in the World will have one thing in common  
None of them will be in Europe, none in the United States.” *Audre Lorde, 1989.*

### **1.0 Historical Background**

Audre Lorde’s words above provide a poetic cartography of the historical and political locale of the “Third World” nations in a Eurocentric world. A world defined only in relational terms and crisscrossed with dividing lines of power and resistance. For centuries, the formerly colonized nations have persistently resisted the detrimental effects of imperialism and Western hegemony. Notably, today, many of these countries have made significant strides towards self-independence although neocolonialism is still a hurdle.

In order to contextualize the study, I begin this research with a brief history of Iran under the occupation of two superpowers; Great Britain and Russia and the events that prompted the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 after the Islamic revolution.

In 1907, during the Anglo – Russian Convention, Great Britain and Russia partitioned Persia (present-day Iran) into two spheres. The northern sphere was under the Russian empire

while the South was dominated by Britain. Each of these powers sought exclusive commercial rights within their areas of domination.

Barrack Obama, in his memoir, *A Promised Land* (2020) gives a detailed history of the British occupation in Iran and how it led to the establishment of the theocratic government. He says that in his endeavor to create diplomatic relations with other countries in the world, three countries posed an existential threat to America during his tenure as the president. Among the three, was Iran, “being the heir of the great Persian empires of the antiquity, once an epicenter of science and art during Islam’s medieval golden age” (450). Although Iran was one of the most civilized ancient countries in the Middle East, it was still perceived as one of the poorest nations as per the Western standards. However, the country’s natural resources and peculiar culture continued to attract the West. Barrack writes:

In 1951, the secular, left-leaning government moved to nationalize the country’s oil fields, seizing control of profit that had once gone to the British government, which owned a majority stake in Iran’s biggest oil production and export company. Unhappy to be boxed out, the Brits imposed a naval blockade to prevent Iran from shipping oil to would-be buyers. They also convinced the Eisenhower administration that the new Iranian government was tilting towards the Soviets. An engineered coup that deposed Iran’s democratically elected prime minister and the final consolidation of power in the hands of the country’s young monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah became a stalwart ally who extended contracts to U.S. oil companies and bought plenty of U.S. weaponry. He maintained friendly relations with Israel, gave women the right to vote, used the country’s growing

wealth to modernize the economy and the education system, and mingled easily with Western businesspeople and European royalty. (450 - 451)

According to Barrack Obama, the gradual but steady political infiltration of the Western social and cultural norms through their continuous interaction with the Shah awakened the native's consciousness about the erosion of their cultural identity and depletion of their natural resources. Oblivious of the brewing tension against the British occupation and the entrenchment of the Western norms, the clergy and their followers contested the serious disregard and violation of the core tenets of Islam. The Shah was blamed for westernizing the country and making the natives suffer unemployment and low income, especially those employed in tobacco farms.

Stephen Kinzer, an American journalist, in *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (2008), documents how Britain established their rule in Persia and took control of the Anglo - Persian Oil in Masjed Soleiman renaming it British Petroleum at the start of World War I. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Stephen notes that the British dominance in the South became so pronounced that Khuzestan, Busher and other cities were occupied by Great Britain. According to Stephen, the British administration purchased 51% of the company in 1914 retaining almost full control over the oil industry. The subsequent war was an effort to free the Anglo – Iranian Oil Company from British control. Later, a British Minister commented on the Persian's disillusionment and anger towards an industry developed on their own soil of which they had no control.

In this struggle against foreign domination, exploitation and violation of religious core values, my interest is in the position of Iranian woman. Historians of ancient Persia have recorded that during the Achaemenid's era, women participated in the country's civic affairs. For instance,



Herodotus (2012) records that Persian men and women worked together to manage the affairs of the state and participated in public ceremonies.

Observably, women's status changed depending on who was in power. During the Qajar dynasty, from the late 18th to 19<sup>th</sup> Century after the Muslim conquest of Persia around 600AD, Persian women became more isolated and hardly participated in the public spheres. Their economic contribution was limited to household work. A remarkable transformation was noted after Shah Pahlavi took over in 1925. In his reign, women gained more rights and freedom. This was in line with his vision of modernizing Iran. Onsanloo Arzoo in *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (2009), documents that women's rights and freedom were established through the Shah's wish for Iran to become a more modern country. Onsanloo notes that these reforms as propagated during the White Revolution were only embraced by a few elites. The majority of the Iranian populace opted to retain their indigenous culture. The Islamic Revolution in 1979 ousted Shah from power and a theocratic regime was established to reinforce Islamic values that had been violated in the name of modernizing Iran as the imperialists continued to benefit from the country's resources.

It is against this historical backdrop that the rift between the "First (Western)World" and the "Third World" was created, hence my interest in the position of the woman in Iran. In my view, the success of the European colonial mission of the "Third World" countries relied squarely on their collaboration with the native elites in positions of influence who could negotiate businesses and therefore, the Iranian theocratic government was put in place to resist foreign domination and cultural imperialism. The novel under study presents the experiences of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran during this important historical time and how their lives have been shaped overtime.

## 1.1 Introduction

In an interview dated 19<sup>th</sup> August 2013 in the *bookaholic.ro* by Cristina Foarfa, Parinoush Saniee talked about a writer's role in giving insights into the reality of their country through Literature.

With close reference to her debut novel *The Book of Fate*, she remarked:

Iran is unique in that she has had to fight for centuries to protect her own culture and language against invaders and only with difficulty can she fit in various global categorization. Being an Islamic country, her Islam is quite different from others because she has managed to maintain her own linguistic and cultural traits and independence. This uniqueness of culture can only be captured well through art such as writing, film and painting.

Evidently, Saniee's remark connotes some of the major struggles of the formerly colonized nations namely, cultural and national identity. Bill Ashcroft et al., in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) state that "more than three-quarters of the people living in the world today had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1). However, despite the overt political changes in terms of freedom from colonial rule, the colonized were still caught up in a dilemma about their cultural and national identity with the colonizer's culture taking the center stage and the focal point of comparison to the colonized cultures.

From Historical records, the world was partitioned into three: First, Second and Third World based on political and economic powers (Sauvy, 1986). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Second World became obsolete while the First and Third Worlds continued to be used in reference to the developed and developing worlds respectively. According to Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), during the colonialization process, Europe divided the world into two parts;

the East and the West also called “Orient” and “Occident”. Demystifying further these binary opposite terms in Oriental discourse, Said posits that the Orient (East) exists for the Occident (West) and is constructed by and in relation to the latter. In other words, it is the mirror image reflecting what is exotic and inferior to the Western (First) World. In this study, I am interested in the representation of Iranian women who geographically are located in the Orient.

The question of representation of the “Third World” or Oriental woman in mainstream feminism discourse has often spiked the interest of a number of critics and writers. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1994) offers a profound critique of both the subaltern history and the Western view of women in the Global South. Being a “Third World” woman herself, Spivak addresses the problem of their misrepresentation, lack of voice and agency in historiography with particular focus to the Hindu cultural practice where she observes the complete absence of women’s voices from the debate on the abolition of Sati. Spivak’s interest is whether Indian women who practice Sati have a voice with regard to this issue, and if they do, her concern is who would give them a listening ear. She critiques the subaltern woman’s dependence on the Western intellectuals to speak for her because of her “inability” to speak for herself in an oppressive patriarchal society, what she terms, “White men saving brown women from brown men ” (92). She maintains that the Western knowledge, however innocent, only fuels “Third World” women's oppression. In tune with Spivak, Trinh Minh –ha in her work, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989) also illuminates into this disconnect between Third World and Western women. In her third chapter titled, “Difference: A Special Third World Women Issue,” Trinh asserts:

It is not unusual to encounter cases where the sense of specialness, which comes here with being the "first" or the "only" woman, is confused with the consciousness

of difference. One cannot help feeling "special" when one figures among the rare few to emerge above the anonymous crowd and enjoys the privilege of preparing the way for one's more "unfortunate" sisters. Based on what other women are not (capable of) doing, such a reward easily creates a distance-if not a division-between I-who-have-made-it and You-who-cannot-make-it. (86)

While Spivak delves on the misrepresentation and the degradation of the Subaltern woman, her lack of voice and agency, Trinh critiques the Western women's feeling of specialness and their regard of the "Third World" woman as an "unfortunate" sister in need of their liberation. She maintains that the rift was created by the notion that the Other (third world) women were incapable of doing what they (first world) women were able to do. Of significance to this study is Trinh's argument of the acceptance of the existing difference between the first and the third world women and the fact that each group has its own unique issues to handle.

This research is interested in showing how Parinoush Saniee represents the contemporary Iranian woman in *The Book of Fate*. It is my view that Saniee's narrative portrays the real-life experiences of the women in Iran and the issues they grapple with against the historical backdrop of British Occupation, Islamic revolution, and the final declaration of the country as an Islamic state. Saniee fashions her story to reflect how these major historical events have shaped and continue to shape the lives of Iranian women. For instance, the story of women such as Massoumeh Sadeghi, Parvaneh Ahmadi, Faati, Mrs Parvin and the general populace of Tehran provide the personal and collective stories from which the position of women in Iran can be interpreted. In addition to this, I also argue that by placing *The Book of Fate* in a conversation with the nations' history, Saniee deconstructs and subverts the binaries that distinguish the "Third World" women from the "First World" women providing a new space for the "Third World"

Iranian women's representation. In studying the "how" of *The Book of Fate*, I intend to examine the various narrative strategies such as the narrative voice, narrative order, the setting among others, and their significance in representing women in Iran.

Born and brought up in Tehran - Iran, Parinoush Saniee is well known as an Iranian novelist, Sociologist, Psychologist, and researcher. Her two published works of fiction, *The Book of Fate* (2013) and *I Hid My Voice* (2016) portray everyday life in Tehran. Her first novel, *The Book of Fate* is one of Iran's best-selling novels that won the Italian Boccaccio prize for the best international book, testifying to its international acclaim. The novel has been translated into twenty-six languages. The English version was translated by Sara Khalili and listed by The World Literature Today as one of the seventy-five notable translations of the year 2013.

### **1.1.2 Synopsis**

*The Book of Fate* tells the story of a young girl growing up in a rural village called Qum before her family moved to Tehran in search of job opportunities to better their lives. Saniee narrates the life of Massoumeh in pre-revolutionary Iran through five turbulent decades of Iranian history before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution. It is a kind of a coming-of-age story about a girl with the zeal and avidity for education. Her falling in love with a chemist assistant leads to the termination of her education and she is forced to marry a stranger. Facing a loveless life, Massoumeh is devastated, dejected and disillusioned but compelled by circumstances to accept her fate. However, events take an ironic twist upon realizing the stranger's indifference towards their marriage.

Hamid, her husband being a political dissident and therefore a threat to the ruling regime defies the set Islamic norms with his democratic and communist ideologies. On his arrest and final

execution, Massoumeh experiences the burden of bringing up her children as a single mother in a country experiencing political turmoil and economic deterioration. Her life is dictated by the changing fortunes of her country. It is no doubt that Parinoush Saniee has fashioned the protagonist of her novel *Massoumeh*, as an important character that aids in the plot development of the novel.

The setting of the novel is Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Saniee's narrative spans continents, places and even centuries but consciously maintains Tehran as the center. The deliberate setting of the story in the city is critical in looking at the two antagonistic forces (modernity and tradition) at play and how they affect the contemporary Iranian woman living in Tehran. It is my view that in order for all to progress and flourish, accepting and embracing the existing differences between women in the Global South nations is paramount due to their varying experiences and cultures.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Mainstream feminism discourse has often presented women as a singular group on the basis of their shared oppressive denominator – patriarchy. For instance, “what binds them together is a sociological notion of the “sameness” of their oppression” (Mohanty, 337) despite their varied circumstances. Muslim women in particular for long have been portrayed as powerless victims of their oppressive culture with limited consideration of their historical and cultural background. Therefore, since patriarchal and social dimensions barely account for the status of women in various contexts, I presuppose that mainstream discourse does not offer a sufficient platform for the examination of the idiosyncrasies involved in the representation of women in the Global South. Consequently, this study seeks to exploit various literary strategies linked to postcolonial studies

in order to demonstrate how Saniee's novel, *The Book of Fate* articulates the perspectives and conditions of women in Iran from an artistic and temporal direction. Using the background of the writer of the text, as well as that of the author of this dissertation, the study extrapolates their experiences to women in other "Third World" countries.

Through the narrative strategies used, Saniee has brought to the fore important techniques that aid in re-defining and re-presenting the contemporary Iranian woman in hybrid space. Saniee, therefore injects a new dimension to the feminism discourse challenging the notion of homogeneity of women. This study seeks to investigate how the author positions the third-world woman thereby contributing to the debate of the representation of "Third World" women, specifically the Muslim women in Iran.

### **1.3 Objectives**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a. To evaluate the historical depiction of Iranian women's experiences in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*
- b. To examine the representation of the contemporary Iranian woman in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*
- c. To investigate the effectiveness of the various narrative strategies used in *The Book of Fate* to represent the contemporary Iranian woman.

## 1.4 Hypothesis

This study presupposes that:

- a. Iranian women's experiences have been depicted against the historical backdrop of Iran in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*
- b. The contemporary Iranian Woman has been represented in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*
- c. The narrative strategies are effective in representing the contemporary Iranian woman in *The Book of Fate* by Parinoush Saniee.

## 1.5 Justification

Charting the ground for understanding the position and condition of Iranian Muslim woman, a number of questions on the definition and context come to the limelight. For instance, does her struggles fit in the mainstream feminist discourse? From what or whose historical or cultural background can her engagement with feminism be drawn? And who produces the knowledge about her and from what space or location? The nuances of defining and understanding the condition of the Iranian Muslim woman, therefore, warrant scholarly investigation.

A number of texts in mainstream feminism discourse have however presented "Third World" women as victims of patriarchy, victims of various religious ideologies, victims of colonial processes, dependents on men, and so on with limited investigation of the history and cultures of their specific communities. Saniee is outstanding in her representation of the Iranian Muslim



woman in her debut novel *The Book of Fate*. The way she weaves Iranian women's experiences with the history of the nation is quite intriguing and calls for scholarly investigation.

Further, it is important to mention that a survey done on the works of Parinoush Saniee, reveals a series of scholarly studies. Suhasini Patni's in her review titled "A Child's Muteness Pits Nurture and Love Against a Male Culture of Success" of Saniee's second work, *I Hid My Voice*, remarks on how the novel dissects patriarchy entrenched in the Iranian society. Shokoofehsadat Hoseini in her Master thesis, "A Feminist Analysis of Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*," also focuses on the antagonistic patriarchal forces to the protagonist's progress. Ali Taghizadeh et al., in "Power Relations in Parinoush Saniee's *Sahm – Eman (The Book of Fate)*" observe that the narrative reflects Foucault's notions of resistance, power relations, normalization, and self-formation. In this respect, it is evident that Parinoush Saniee's work has not received much critical artistic attention. Most of the critical assessments are reviews about it.

Therefore, this study reads Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* with respect to how she positions and represents Iranian women in hybrid space against the historical backdrop of Iran. What renders the text an artistic piece is a language and style adopted by the author in the narrative. Hence my interest in the effectiveness of the various narrative strategies employed in the portrayal of the contemporary Iranian woman in hybrid space.

## **1.6 Scope and Limitation**

This study is limited to aspects that correspond to the presupposed hypothesis in Parinoush Saniee's novel, *The Book of Fate*. My attention is in examining how the author has depicted Iranian

women's experiences against Iran's historical backdrop and represented them in the hybrid space as well as the narrative strategies that Parinoush Saniee employs.

To achieve the set objectives, I engage critical texts that espouse the concept of the "Third World" and the "Oriental" feminism discourse. Among them: Chandra Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Trinh Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture*. As such, I confine myself to the Postcolonial theoretical approach, Intersectionality and Narratology to guide the study. Other secondary sources will be consulted to corroborate information provided in the primary text.

## **1.7 Literature Review**

This section presents a review of critical and scholarly works on the subject under discussion. First, I begin with a review of works expounding on the concept of the "Third World Woman," tracing her position from the pre-colonial period in different "Third World" countries. Thereafter, the focus shifts to the critical attention of the author and her other works. I also engage works on narrative strategies to offer scholarly insights and literary appreciation of the representation of Iranian woman in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* in an attempt to bring out the gap that I seek to fill.

In tracing the genesis of the "Third World" women's disempowerment, a number of scholars argue that in the pre-colonial period, these women had power and autonomy in society. They contributed both socially, economically and politically for the betterment of their communities. In the Yoruba community in West Africa – Nigeria for instance, Azodo Uzoamaka,

in her article, “Issues in African Feminism,” claims that women were the main participants in the long-distance trade where they accumulated wealth and great titles. According to Azodo, the most successful of these women earned the title *Iyalode*, which implied a woman with great privilege and power. Azodo remarks that, “there existed a complementarity of male and female roles in the pre-colonial African societies and that it is during and after colonization that the downfall of an African woman from a position of power and self-sovereignty to becoming man’s helper occurred” (3). Using the Islamic Republic of Iran as a case study, this research is concerned with the strides that women therein have made post British and Russian occupation thus attaining autonomy and independence both in the public and private spaces.

Although men retained the headship of the patrilineal system, older women in most Global South nations had more power, a voice in many issues and influence over men and younger women. Writing about the status of women in the pre-colonial Senegal, George Brooks in his work, *The Signares of St. Louis: The Women Entrepreneurs of Eighteenth-Century Senegal* (1980), avers that women in the region held positions of power, possessed great wealth, were beautiful, graceful and had an attractive cultured way of life. However, their continued collaboration and interaction with the colonialists stripped them of their autonomy in the public spaces. In this regard, I opine that the idea of patriarchy was a strategy that served the interest of the colonizers in conquering their colonies.

Various oral forms also justify the original powerful positions that the Global South woman held in the pre-colonial period. Elizabeth Wanjiru in her (2015) Ph.D. thesis titled, *Social Construction of Gender in Gikuyu Community as Portrayed in Narratives, Songs and Proverbs*, analyses the oral forms of the Gikuyu community in Kenya to establish the dynamics of power relations between men and women. She records the Gikuyu myth of origin where the Gikuyu – the

father of all Gikuyu people was promised a land flowing with milk and honey by God (Ngai). On his way to the river, he was given a wife, Mumbi. On their arrival to the promised land, they were blessed with nine daughters whose names have been used to name the nine clans of the Gikuyu community thus the matriarchal nature of the community. Elizabeth notes that the women wielded political, social and economic power while men played subordinate roles.” She mentions *Wangu wa Makeri* who was given the title “headman” by the white men although her leadership was not much appreciated because patriarchy had already entrenched the community with the coming of the white men. The oral narrative about Buffaloes and antelopes (*Mbogo na Thia*) demonstrates that women in the precolonial period owned animals. While Elizabeth discusses the depiction of women through these oral forms in the established patriarchal society in Kenya, this research focuses on Muslim women in the Middle East, particularly in Iran, who for long have been portrayed as docile, weak and perpetual victims of religious oppression.

The most outstanding influence on the position and privilege of women in most African countries during the twentieth century was the amalgamation of patriarchy and colonialism (Falola, 112). He argues that as the native male chiefs collaborated with the British colonial administration in collecting taxes and governing, the significance of female chiefs gradually declined and with time were pushed to the periphery. Thus, Falola agrees with the fact that colonial history impacted the lives of women in the Global South which forms the thrust of this research.

Sehausen et al.,’s article “A Colonial Legacy of African Gender Inequality? Evidence from Kampala,” point to the colonial legacy behind women’s powerlessness. Anne Price, however, in *Colonial History: Muslim Presence and Gender Equity Ideology* (2008) looks beyond the effect of colonialism on women’s positions to the political and social instability of the nation at large. She argues that besides the shift of women’s status and autonomy after colonialism, the social and

political systems of the third world nations were destabilized as well so that power was retained by individuals as opposed to the community as it were in the precolonial period.

Rhoda Reddock, a feminist scholar in her work, *Women and Slavery in the Caribbean* (1985) shows the subjugation of slave women in the Caribbean who were not allowed to marry or have children since their masters thought it costly to care for them. At the same time, Reddock notes that the bourgeois class decided to domesticate their women into “pure, monogamous breeders of their heirs” hence excluded from work in the public spheres and could not own property. The motive being to “civilize” them because gender equality was perceived as primitive and backward hence the justification for the colonies’ need for civilization.

Fielding Hall, who was a political officer in the British Colonial Administration in his book *A People at School* (2009) details the independence of Burmese women in the pre-colonial days; gender equality and the peace that prevailed in Burma before British intervention. In their successful mission to align the Burmese with the road of progress and civilization, Hall writes, “but today the laws are ours, the power, the authority. We govern for our own subjects and we govern in our own way. Our whole presence here is against their desires” (264). According to Fielding, violence was brought forth when the Burmese men were made to kill and fight for the British colonialists and women were taught to be dependent on men.

With the notion that gender equity is a sign of backwardness, Fielding records that a colonial administrator warned: “It must never be forgotten that their civilization is relatively a thousand years behind ours” (265). To overcome the perceived primitiveness, the Burmese men were instructed to make war, fight for the colonialists and subordinate their women. In the words of Hall: ‘What the surgeon’s knife is to the diseased body that is the soldier’s sword to the diseased

nations' (265). The local industries formerly run by women were destroyed by the importation of goods from England hence women lost their economic independence. Hall writes:

Woman had to understand that her independence stood in the way of progress. Without her power of independence, her free will and influence would disappear. When she is dependent on her husband she can no longer dictate to him. When he feeds her, she is no longer able to make her voice as loud as his is. It is inevitable that she should retire ... The nations who succeed are not feminine nations but masculine. Woman's influence is good provided it does not go too far. Yet it has done so here. It has been bad for the man, bad too for the woman. It has never been good for women to be too independent, it has robbed them of many virtues. It improves a man to have to work for his wife. and family, it makes a man of him. It is demoralizing for both if the woman can keep herself and, if necessary, her husband too. (266)

These scholars demonstrate that the colonizers' success in the colonization process depended on the subordination of women in the Global South. Prior to this, they contributed economically, politically and socially to their societies. In ancient Iran (Persia), women in different categories labored and managed their wealth by themselves. Based on the archaeological evidence of women's lives during the Achaemenid times on fortification and Treasury texts discovered at Persepolis (509-438 BC) and documents recovered at Susa Babylon and other major Mesopotamian cities of the period, Price Massoume in her article "Women's Lives in Ancient Persia", writes:

They all had titles with recognized authority at the court, and had their own administration for managing their considerable wealth. Funerary customs and

inscriptions commemorating the death of royal women also reflect the official recognition of these women, particularly the king's mother and wife. The king was the ultimate source of authority and the royal women acted within a clearly defined spectrum of norms and standards set by the king. However, within the spectrum, they enjoyed economic independence, were involved in the administration of economic affairs, traveled and controlled their wealth and position by being active, resolute and enterprising. (23)

Akin to other women in the Global South nations, women in ancient Persia also held positions of power and autonomy, operating comfortably within the laid structure of the Persian society. Colonialism hence stripped women of their original high status relegating them to the periphery of the society. Therefore, in analyzing the representation and position of the contemporary Iranian woman, it is crucial to study the historical context of their experiences. Mohanty contends that due to the many interconnected forces oppressing women in the Global South, it is critical to take into account the history behind their situation in order to get a wider view of the issues they grapple with. She emphasizes the significance of probing the history behind the condition of women in third-world nations instead of homogenizing their experiences. Thus, it is against the Iranian revolution's historical backdrop that this study interrogates Iranian women's representation in hybrid space with a particular focus on Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*.

Maria Mies in *Patriarchy and Capital Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) argues that patriarchy and colonialism are intricately intertwined. She analyses the dialectics of progress and retrogression on men and women; colonies and the colonized where the progress of one, implies regress of the other. The colonizer's progress was pegged on their exploitation of the colonies; the same way, men's progress means subordination of women hence the latter's retrogression. This

contradictory process, Maria argues had been ignored in the past yet key in understanding women's marginalization in the Third World and their lack of agency. She states that "women, nature and colonies were externalized, declared to be outside civilized society, pushed down and thus made invisible as the under-water part of an iceberg is invisible, yet constitute the base of the whole" (111). Like Mohanty, Maria posits that each constituent in this relationship ought to be analyzed distinctly. Further, she points out the gap in the literature demonstrating how colonial history has affected women in the countries like Africa, Asia, Middle East among others, asserting the adverse effects the exploitation must have had on women in the colonized worlds. It is this gap that this research comes in to fill.

The idea of women's dependence on their male counterparts was therefore a strategy initiated by the colonizers to get their way through the colonies and impose their "civilized" culture. In the Islamic nations, for instance, the notion of the veil and women's adherence to the Islamic codes was perceived as a symbol of subjugation. This ideology negatively impacted on some women in Iran hence deviating from their tradition.

Milani Farzaneh in *Veils and Worlds: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women* (1992) records that many women in Iran resisted this ideology arguing that the veil and the Islamic dress code gave them the true Islamic identity and culture. In Iran, veiling was a way of protest against foreign domination hence the harsh punishment to those who defied such codes. Fatima Mernissi, a scholar in Islam also adds her voice to the Islamic nation's attempt to keep their national identity. In her work *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (1987), Fatima avers that "the existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power" (105). In



her view, the recent rise of women's supposed repression in some Muslim countries stemmed from a rejection of colonial influence in order to maintain their cultural identity.

Muslim women have always upheld their religious beliefs and traditions that define and distinguish them from others. Mariama Ba, an African Muslim woman and writer from Senegal narrates the everyday life and struggles of women in her well-known, epistolary work, *So Long a Letter* (1981). In this text, Mariama Ba presents women's problems in both a culturally and historically specific manner in postcolonial Senegal. Though beaten and weighed down by the patriarchal ideologies, Ramatoulaye displays her unflinching devotion to her religion that has always defined her and follows its requirements to the latter. Rama tells Aissatou:

I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness. May their evocation not soil the state of purity in which I must live.

(9)

Nevertheless, Rama expresses her disappointment at the way their long-cherished traditions have been corrupted and washed away by the history of colonialism. She is appalled by the gift of banknotes that the mourners give her and observes how men try to outdo each other. She expresses her longing for the traditional unquantifiable gifts that demonstrated the selflessness and generosity of the Senegalese.

Since postcolonial discourse is concerned with the colonial legacies of imperialism and colonialism of the European nation in their former colonies as well as providing a way in which

the world can objectively forge ahead towards mutual acceptance of the existing cultural, historical and geographical differences, this study aims at examining how the lives of Iranian women have been shaped and continue to be shaped by their imperial history.

### **1.7.1 Critical Attention to Parinoush Saniee and her Other Works**

*The Book of Fate* has not received much critical attention save for some newspaper reviews on some important aspects of the novel since its publication in 2013. For instance, Brandon Robshaw in his English paperback edition review in *The Independent* on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014, titled “*Expo 58* by Jonathan Coe; *Command and Control* by Eric Schlosser; *Season to Taste* by Natalie Young; *The Book of Fate* by Parinoush Saniee; *The Undercover Economist Strikes* by Tim Harford,” comments that *The Book of Fate*, written with passion and a burning hunger, is a compelling novel that gives an account of five decades of Iranian history and the awful lives women have to live under a religious patriarchal regime.

Emily Walz, another reviewer, writing to the *Star Tribune* on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2013, notes that *The Book of Fate* follows Massoumeh, the eldest surviving daughter in a traditional religious household where brothers are favoured and daughters are subjects to their whims and beatings. Additionally, both reviewers acknowledge and give credit to the witty and skillful use of language by the author in creating such a compelling and captivating story of women’s strength and resilience. Whilst this study also focuses on the protagonist of the novel (Massoumeh) like Emily and Brandon, the line of departure is that this research extrapolates on how Parinoush Saniee positions and represents Iranian women against the historical backdrop of British occupation and Islamic Revolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Writing a review of Saniee's second novel *I Hid My Voice*, titled "A Child's Muteness Pits Nurture and Love Against a Male Culture of Success," Suhasini Patni notes that besides it being an allegory of the government, the novel challenges patriarchy in the Iranian society. She argues that Saniee's novel navigates the burden that women in a family have to bear despite their education and enlightenment. Saniee employs real-life stories that she has witnessed or heard of to narrate the experiences of Iranian women living in a country under political upheaval.

Despite Saniee being one of the outstanding novelists in Iran, her literary works have not received a lot of criticism in the recent past. In his comparative study of Saniee's *The Book of Fate and Missing Soluch* by Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, Alborz Ghandehari observes that the two texts are important landmarks for feminist historical writing in Iran that disrupt the official narratives in the country. In particular, he points out that Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* constructs a feminist politics critical of the post-revolutionary nation's "betrayal" of Iranian women despite their active participation in the revolution. The "betrayal" was the state's strategy to redefine and retain Iran's national identity by keeping away from western influences.

Taghizadeh Ali et al. reads *The Book of Fate* from a New – Historicism perspective. In his article titled, "Power Relations in Parinoush Saniee's *Sahm – Eman (The Book of Fate)*" (2015) Taghizadeh et al., asserts that the narrative is a true reflection of Foucauldian notions of resistance, power relations, normalization and self-formation in the five phases of Massoumeh's life. With the consideration of how power imposes an ideology on the citizens, Ali Taghizadeh et al. demonstrates how the narrator's life is influenced by power dynamics in Iran. Also her persistent resistance and the fact that she eventually succumbs to these forces that define her. Shokoofehsadat Hoseini on the other hand uses the feminist lens to critique Saniee's *The Book of Fate*. In her article, "A Feminist Analysis of Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*," she focuses on patriarchy

as the major cause of the protagonist's problems. She points out the negative and contemptuous view towards girls, the superstitious belief towards women and them being victims of various types of violence on their fellow women.

Parinoush Saniee's critical attention, although scanty but crucial to this study. The works by Shokoofehsadat, Emily and Suhasini foreground patriarchy as the force that the protagonist reckons with. They both demonstrate how oppressed the Muslim woman is in a patriarchal system that gives limited attention to the needs of the girl child. "Where there is power, there is resistance". Taghizadeh et al. explores and justifies the novel's alignment with Michele Foucault's postulation about power and resistance in his work, *Knowledge and Discourse*. This research, however, takes the postcolonial approach to investigate the representation of the contemporary Iranian woman in hybrid space by reading Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* in light of Iran's history of imperialism. Also central to this study is how Saniee employs various narrative strategies to represent the contemporary women of Iran. From the literature reviewed, this research maintains that Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* is worth a scholarly investigation in the literary study since it contributes to the whole debate of the representation of the Global South women in literary feminist discourse.

## **1.8 Theoretical Framework**

This research is anchored on three literary conceptual frameworks that aid in understanding the different angles of the study. I believe that it is only when literary studies are theorized that the research hypotheses can be tested and proven. This premise thus permits me to invite the postcolonial theoretical approach to understand the postcolonial legacies and struggles of the

formerly colonized “Third World” nations. The theory of Intersectionality aids in identifying the different factors that contribute to Iranian women's oppression and narratology is essential in the literary appreciation of the text under study in terms of aesthetics.

### **1.8.1 Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory is a postmodern intellectual discourse that critiques the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. As a literary tool of criticism, Postcolonial theory deals with literature from countries that were previously under colonial powers. It is mostly concerned with the relations between the colonizer and the colonized. Cognisant of the effects of colonialism, postcolonial criticism aims at accounting for and combating the residual effects of colonialism on the cultures of the colonized so that by rewriting history, the world can forge ahead, towards a place of mutual respect. Proponents of this theory, therefore, are concerned with challenging Western ideologies and creating space for multiple voices that had been silenced – the Subalterns.

Oriental discourses have often generalized the colonized nations putting them under one umbrella label ‘Third World’. According to Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002) “this universalism is rejected by postcolonial criticism” (128). Barry claims that “whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, then, white, Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted by a sleight of hand to this elevated status, and all others correspondingly relegated to a subsidiary, marginalized roles” (128). Postcolonial criticism demonstrates the heterogeneity of these nations by analyzing the different impacts of Western colonialism on different countries, peoples, and cultures.

The ancestry of postcolonial theory, Barry says “can be traced to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1968) first published in French in 1961, and voicing what might be called 'cultural resistance' to France's African empire” (129). In his work, Fanon (a psychiatrist from Martinique), argued that the first step for the colonized people in finding their voice and identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonial power misrepresented their colonies’ history and culture. Barry contends that “If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued” (130) thus insisting on probing colonial history.

I find Barry’s argument about the place of history in postcolonial discourse important in this study since *The Book of Fate* represents women against the historical background of Iran’s Islamic Revolution that resulted in the declaration of the country as an Islamic State as a way of resisting foreign domination. Thus, postcolonial criticism recognizes that there was, and still is, resistance to Western influence. In addition, the study also borrows Homi Bhabha’s concepts of colonial ambivalence and hybridity in terms of mimicry to aid in understanding colonial legacies in the colonized nations.

Edward Said’s artistic depiction of the constructed binaries between the Orient and the Occident; inferior world versus superior world is pivotal in this research as well. His postulation about the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is important in understanding the representation of women in Iran. I employ Bhabha’s concept of the hybrid space to demonstrate that contemporary Iranian women live in that space.

### 1.8.2 Theory of Intersectionality

Conceptualized and brought to the feminist purview by Kimberly Williams Crenshaw, I invite the theory of intersectionality to aid in understanding how the intersection of multiple factors such as history, gender, race, class among others contribute to Iranian woman's oppression. The theory is concerned with how aspects of a person's social and political identities amalgamate to create different modes of discrimination or privilege. Crenshaw developed this theory as a critique of the first and second-wave feminism discourses that only privileged white and middle-class women. She included the varied experiences of women of color, poor women, immigrant women and other marginalized groups.

According to Cooper Brittney in "Intersectionality" in *Disch, Lisa*, the theory was developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to identify how interlocking systems of power affect women of color in society. The metaphor "Intersectionality" demonstrates the inadequacy of approaches that separate and isolate the systems of oppression, focusing on one and excluding the others (Crenshaw, 1243). As Chandra Mohanty has written: "the assumption is that categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible" (107) hence by separating systems of oppression, gender oppression is diminished.

Since intersectional feminism acknowledges women's different experiences and identities; analyzing the interconnected systems of their oppression, this study found it useful in analyzing the representation of the contemporary Iranian Women in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* in light with the imperial history and the culture of Iran.

### 1.8.3 Narratology

In addition to postcolonial theory and the theory of Intersectionality, the study is also guided by the theory of narratology. Peter Barry defines narratology as “the study of how narratives make meaning and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of story-telling” (145). In conjunction, he avers that Narratology not only entails the reading and interpretation of individual narratives but also a deliberate effort to study the “story” itself as a concept. Mieke Bal in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narratives* (2009) states that “narratology is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events, cultural artifacts that tell a story” (3).

Thus, Narratology entails the study of the narrative structure with the goal of identifying their points of convergence and divergence. Mieke Bal views a narrative text as “a finite, structured whole composed of language.” (8). The subject in a text conveys to the narratee a story through a given medium which could be in the form of language, sound, imagery among others. Thus, the proponents of this theory emphasize the inseparability of the text and language.

This study particularly uses Gerard Genette’s narratological poetics that focuses on the Story, the Narrative and Narrating. According to Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980), a narrative is made up of three basic components which can be evaluated to determine how a narrative is organized. These are; the Story (the signified), the Narrative (the signifier, that is, the statements that comprise the discourse in the text itself) and Narrating (producing the narrative action/the entire real or fictional situation in which the action/plot of the narrative takes place) (27).



Genette emphasizes how and in which way a textual matter is presented and sets apart the focalization (perspective) from the traditional point of view and voice (the narrating agent). Focalization defines the perspective the story is told whereas the voice defines the narrator. An understanding of the narrative perspective, that is to say, from whose point of view has the story been told, helps in the authentic representation of Iranian women. By narrating their own stories, their voices are brought to the mainstream. Employing the theory of the narrative for literary research, as a literary critic, therefore, I must pay attention to who is telling the story or from whose perspective the story is told. Genette's typology hence proved essential for this research.

## **1.9 Methodology**

This research is concerned with examining how the contemporary Iranian woman has been represented in hybrid space. As such, the primary source of my research is the text, *The Book of Fate* by Parinoush Saniee. A close textual reading and practical criticism of the novel directed me to the various excerpts that responded to the set objectives of the study.

Concerning the sources of the secondary materials, I relied mostly on online research where I fetched journals, e-books and articles from JSTOR and Z – Library. From these sites, I gathered works that capture integral information to complement the text under study. These works are crucial in understanding the different perspectives of other critics and corroborating the primary text. Last but not least, I also used some published and unpublished Masters and Ph.D. theses that advance the study.

## 2.0 Chapter Outline

This research has four chapters.

**Chapter One:** Introduces the study by providing the historical context, information about the author, Parinoush Saniee and the text's synopsis. The statement of the problem, research objectives, hypothesis to be tested, research rationale, scope and limitation, literature review, theoretical frameworks and the methodologies adopted for this research are also discussed in this chapter.

**Chapter Two:** 'The Historical Depiction of Iranian Woman in *The Book of Fate* delves into how the colonial history of Iran has shaped and continues to shape the lives of women in Iran. The focus here is to demonstrate how Parinoush Saniee presents women's experiences in a country struggling to reclaim and retain its cultural and national identity from foreign influence.

**Chapter Three:** 'Representation of the Contemporary Iranian Woman in *The Book of Fate*'. Here I examine how the author has positioned and represented the contemporary Iranian women, extrapolating their representation to women in the other Global South nations. Further, I closely examine how the writer has represented the various concerns of these women in the hybrid space.

**Chapter Four:** 'Narrative Strategies Used to Represent the Contemporary Iranian woman' entails an analysis of the narrative strategies employed in narrating Iranian woman's experiences in *The Book of Fate*. The aim is to demonstrate the role that these unique narratological aspects play in restaging particular narratives that narrate women's experiences in the hybrid space.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE HISTORICAL DEPICTION OF IRANIAN WOMAN IN *THE BOOK OF FATE*

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the depiction of Iranian women's experiences against Iran's historical background in Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*. I begin by probing Iran's history of British and Russian occupation and their struggle against imperialism in order to understand how Iranian women's lives have been shaped. By examining how the author weaves the experiences of Iranian women with the major historical events, demonstrating how these events have shaped women's lives, I focus on the interplay between Islamic and Western ideologies. With women taking the center stage in this ideological difference, I analyze their depiction as the determinants of the nation's identity, signifiers of their cultural purity and as the bearers of the family's collective honor. Further, the chapter questions the notion that the Iranian Muslim Woman is a victim of her religious ideologies as purported in the mainstream feminism discourse about women in Islamic nations. The idea here is to demonstrate how central and specific history is in understanding women in the Global South as opposed to the prevailing generalizations about them.

#### 2.2 Women in the Ancient Persian History

An overview of the lives of women in the ancient Persia provides unique insights into the social and economic lives that these women – both royal and non-royal lived. Akin to the women in the other “Third World” countries, they possessed power and autonomy, great wealth and an attractive

culture. Based on the archeological evidence of women in Archaemenid's times, (Price, 24) observes that the Persian women had titles that were determined by their relationship with the King. The highest in the rank was the King's mother who was in charge of the other female members of the household. According to Price, although ultimate power belonged to the King, women operated within a clearly defined spectrum of norms and standards and enjoyed some level of economic independence. Among the non-royals were also the female managers with different titles reflecting on their skills in the areas of expertise. They managed both men and women.

From the above overview, it is evident that the ancient Iranian society was orderly, structured and women's work complemented those of men for the betterment of the society. However, during her occupation, women were relegated to the periphery as the men, - mostly the (imperialists') allies negotiated businesses on behalf of the other members of the society. Conjured with the Orientalist feminism stereotypical depiction of the "Third World" Muslim women as backward, passive and irrational hence unable to govern themselves, the colonizer found a justification for their annexation mission. Albert Memmi takes this argument a notch higher in his critique of the portrait of the colonizer in *The Colonizer and The Colonized* (1957). He contends that the colonizer's aim was to establish and retain his control over the colonized whom he perceived to be less intelligent and weak in terms of governorship. He writes:

A foreigner, having come to a land by the accidents of history, the colonizer has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant, granting himself astounding privileges to the detriment of those rightfully entitled to them. And this not by virtue of local laws, which in a certain way legitimize this inequality by tradition, but by upsetting the established rules

and substituting his own. He thus appears doubly unjust. He is a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper. (9)

According to Albert Memmi, the colonizers were aware that the most favored colonized would never be anything but colonized people. In essence, they would never enjoy certain rights, as these are strictly reserved for the colonizer who “possess” power and the intellect to govern. In a bifurcated struggle to retain her national and cultural identity amidst growing colonial pressures from Great Britain and Russia, Iran’s geopolitical locale and her endowment with natural resources rendered her fertile ground for the colonial conquest thus, became the arena for the “Great Game” between Russia and Great Britain each declaring their supremacy in the Northern and Southern spheres respectively.

Scholars of history have documented this struggle in detail bringing to the fore the natives’ discontentment with the Shah who was perceived as a Western puppet. Barrack Obama writes that his extravagance, ruthless repression and promotion of the Western norms violated the key tenets of Islam hence his deposition and the eventual establishment of a theocratic state ruled by Sharia laws.

Both empires were determined to continue controlling the Persian economy as well as the government. The most opposed of these reforms by the clergy in 1963 was the white revolution which tried to Westernize the country by allowing women the right to vote, increasing their minimum legal marriage age to 18 and improving their legal rights in divorce among others. These Western reforms were opposed in order to reclaim and retain Iranian culture and national identity from foreign interference. It is against this colonial historical backdrop that Parinoush Saniee presents the woman question in Iran during the pre and post-Islamic Revolution.

According to Tony Bennet in his book, *Outside Literature* (1990), "history does supply a key with which to unlock the meaning of a literary text" (71) hence, the literary text ought to be seen as part of the wider historiography. Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* deserves to be treated as part of Iran's historiography because the author acknowledges the link between a literary work and history. She uses her narrative to shape, order and reinterpret Iranian history putting the woman figure at the center of it. The point is that Saniee's narrative is steeped in the Islamic Republic of Iran's historical landscape selectively and creatively portraying how the history of British and Russian occupation impacted the lives of the populace, particularly the women. Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on the various aspects of Iranian women's lives that have been impacted by the history of imperialism.

### **2.3 Women in Postcolonial Iran**

Although the conditions and experiences of women in the Global South differ remarkably, the colonization process greatly impacted their lives. Contrary to their initial powerful status as chiefs and royal women in King's court, their positions of power significantly diminished after colonialism. Suzzane Spenser in her article, "Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism, Power Dynamics and Social Agency Materialized in Colonial Institutions", postulates that the social institution of patriarchy was fundamental to the economic exploitation of the colonized nations during the colonization process. She observes that the institution further relegated women in these nations to the domestic spheres by undermining their autonomy in the public spaces.

Maria Mies in *Patriarchy and Accumulation of Wealth* conquers with Suzzane. She contends that during colonization, the colonial power painted gender equity as a sign of

backwardness thus justifying their “civilization” mission. The argument that I seek to put forth here is the fact that the colonial process brought the retrogression of the Global South woman from a former high status of relative power and independence as in the case of women in ancient Persia to a status of economic deprivation and dependence. This is demonstrated in Saniee’s *The Book of Fate*.

To begin with, Saniee depicts women in pre-revolutionary Iran as homemakers. The idea of being a homemaker was propagated by the colonizer as the definition of an ideal woman. As Suzzane has argued, the establishment of gender segregation of the colonized was meant to make them conform to the hegemonic Western gender ideology of subservient domestic women. In the novel, Hamid’s mother congratulates Massoumeh for meeting her first obligation as a newly married bride; making her home to the required standard. She further advises her on the reproductive role, “And in nine months you should hand him his first child and nine months later the second one” (98). This confinement to the private realm shows conformity with the colonizer’s ways of controlling women in the colonized nation. In my view, Hamid’s mother perpetuates the colonizer’s idea of women operating within the domestic spheres. This was one of the strategies employed to disempower the “Third World” woman.

Secondly, Iranian women have been depicted as small-scale traders in *The Book of fate*. With her spaces of operation limited to that of the home, the only trade she can engage in is sewing. “Taking sewing classes is more imperative” (5) for Massoumeh than going to school. After losing her job at the government agency, she remembers her mother’s words, “didn’t I tell you sewing is the most important thing for a girl? But you didn’t listen and wasted your time going to school” (222). She is compelled to take up sewing in order to fend for herself and her children during the tough economic times. A number of writers have demonstrated the effect colonialism and

imperialism had on Global South women as concerns to their financial status. In *Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emechetta narrates how Nnu Ego survived the tough economic times by engaging in small trades to earn a living and take care of her children. With the decline of the country's economic muscle, Massoumeh is unable to find another job. She says that no company is recruiting and even the sewing business is not doing well. Mrs. Parvin who had been surviving on the same is unable to get clients because people are no longer buying custom-made clothes. Massoumeh is forced by circumstances to start sewing in order to survive the bad economic times.

Docility, subservience and submissiveness characterized the lives of women during colonization. Having been disempowered and relegated to the private spheres, the Third World woman became docile and dependent on the men. This is shown through some female characters in *The Book of Fate*. Faati has neither voice nor confidence in choosing a husband. Mrs. Parvin is also forced to marry a man twenty-five years older than her because he has money. She tells Massoumeh:

He was forty years old and twenty-five years my senior. My father said, "He has a world of money, several shops in the bazaar, and plenty of land and property around Ghazvin." In short, my father's mouth was watering. Haji Agha said, "If she bears my child, I will give her a sea of money." When they took me to the marriage ceremony, I was feeling worse than you do now." (78)

Mrs. Parvin had no choice but to submit to this absurd marriage. However, with time, these women have made efforts to overcome this through education.



## 2.4 Contesting National and Cultural Identity

The Islamic Republic of Iran, like other nations in the Global South, experienced a brutal, exploitative and oppressive form of imperialism which impacted negatively on both their cultural and national identity. A number of postcolonial theorists have paid great attention to the identity dilemma and colonial ambivalence as some of the legacies of colonialism. Edward Said in *Orientalism* emphasizes that the central point of identity construction of the colonized other begins with resistance against colonizers ideologies and leadership. In other words, the process of decolonization only starts by resisting and challenging the established colonial hegemony with the aim of achieving nationhood.

From their colonial experience, the Islamic Republic of Iran defied Western influences in order to retain its cultural and religious integrity and modesty. They persistently disagreed with the Western attempt to secularize their nation violating the core tenets of Islam hence their struggle to reclaim and redefine the nation as an Islamic state. According to Ali Mazrui in his article, *Islamic and Western Values* (1997), “Westerners painted the Islamic societies as backward-looking, oppressed by religion, and inhumanely governed, as they compared them to their own enlightened, secular democracies” (118). However, closer scrutiny of this reveals that Islam is not just a fundamentalist political movement, rather, a way of life varying from one Muslim nation to the other grounded on more humane values than most westerners thought. In her novel *The Book of Fate*, Saniee engages in this big debate of cultural integrity, modesty and chastity positioning the woman at the center of the battle against Western hegemony in terms of dress and demeanor.

### 2.4.1 The Woman in Veil: Signifier of the Nation's Cultural Purity

In her glossary of terms, Parinoush Saniee defines *hijab* as “the head – covering worn by Muslim women and modest Islamic styles of dress in general” (xiii). In Iran, she explains that the most common forms of *hijab* traditionally were the headscarf and the chador and in post-revolution Iran, women were required to wear a loose-fitting long tunic called *manteaux*. Both the chador and the *hijab* are forms of the veil.

Over the years, the practice of Muslim women's veiling has attracted a great deal of attention particularly of those concerned with women's rights. While some view the practice as oppressive, others perceive it as a symbol of liberation. Masood Khan in *The Muslim Veiling: A symbol of Oppression or Liberation tool?* (2014) unpacks these divergent frameworks exposing the question of female agency in both contexts. He writes:

While in the oppression discourse the veiled women are considered to be devoid of agency; in the liberation and resistance discourse, the veiled women's agency is understood in terms of viewing the veiling as a conscious practice that is upheld by women to pave the way for furthering their own interests within the society. (2)

Owing to the avalanche of studies that have flooded the literary space on the concept of the veil as an oppressive tool, Masood in his article insists that in order to fully comprehend the concept, it is critical to pay attention to the experiences of the veiled Muslim women who wear it for myriad different reasons. Throughout the colonial history and discourse, the “First Worlds” have perpetuated the notion that the Third World Muslim women adorned in veil are oppressed by their

patriarchal religion hence in need of their liberation, what Spivak terms, “white men rescuing brown women from brown men.” On the other hand, the colonization process of the Third World was justified on the grounds of these very practices considered “backward” and oppressive. Seldom was it viewed as a way of asserting internal power residing in them as in the case of Algerian women during the French revolution and as a symbol for Muslim identity.

In the chapter titled, “Algeria Unveiled” in *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (2004), Frantz Fanon avers that wearing the veil in colonial Algeria was initially a form of cultural resistance against French efforts to unveil Algerian women - in their view, winning them over to the side of modernity and liberalism. Fanon asserts that the veil “was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the colonizer bent on unveiling Algeria” (5) during his exploitation and annexation mission while misrepresenting the natives’ cultural and religious beliefs. Fanon further elaborates how unveiling helped Algerian women contribute immensely in the guerrilla warfare that aimed at liberating Algeria from colonial rule. They managed to freely pass through the French checkpoints without being suspected. As he eloquently puts it:

Carrying revolvers, grenades, hundreds of false identity cards or bombs, the unveiled Algerian woman moves like a fish in the Western waters. The soldiers, the French patrols, smile to her as she passes, compliments on her looks are heard here and there, but no one suspects that her suitcases contain the automatic pistol which will presently mow down four or five members of one of the patrols. (9)

The unveiling of the Algerian women served as a misrecognition strategy in order to fight for their liberation. Since the French colonizers could not conceptualize a “westernized” Algerian still harboring anti-colonial intentions, they managed to pass freely with weapons of war contributing

to the national liberation. As the veil aided in the Algerian French revolution in “appearing” and “disappearing” women, in the Islamic Republic of Iran it served to reclaim the cultural and religious identity of the nation.

As a way of rejecting Western consumerism and materialism in favor for Islamic modesty and integrity, Iranian women during the pre and post revolution were made to veil themselves both in public and in private spaces. Masoumeh had to wear a headscarf while going to school in Tehran so that she is not spoiled or corrupted, bringing dishonor to her father, “but I had to promise to be careful and not bring him shame by becoming corrupted and spoiled.” (1). As a visible public marker, under colonial rule, the hijab was a sign that demarcated those who did not conform to the colonizers’ systems of thought, upholding their identity as Muslims. Massoumeh’s mother is afraid that her daughters may not find perfect husbands to marry in Tehran because most Tehranis disregard Islamic values. The narrator says that Uncle Abbas’s wife being a Tehranis only wears a veil when visiting Qum but while in Tehran she does not cover herself. “Uncle Abbas’ wife was from Tehran. She always wore a chador when she came to Qum, but everyone knew in Tehran that she didn’t keep proper hijab. Her daughters paid no mind to anything at all. They even went to school without hijab” (2). For this reason, the narrator’s mother fears that in Tehran her daughters risk Western influence.

Parvaneh and her family are compelled to leave Iran for Germany after the deposition of the Shah because of their conformity to the Western culture. For instance, her mother would go around without wearing a hijab. Ahmad views Parvaneh as the very embodiment of impudence, insolence and immorality. He argues, “to hell with her, even her mother goes around with no hijab (12), elsewhere in the novel, he notices that “she also wears short skirts and swings her hips as she walks” (24). Massoumeh’s close interaction with Parvaneh in Tehran brings him discomfort thus

he feels obligated to watch over and protect her from being corrupted by ensuring that she always covers herself up like a good Muslim girl to maintain her identity.

Other than symbolizing piety, the *hijab* served to maintain good morals among men and women in Iranian society. Women were required to wear their hijabs to keep men from lust, especially those who are not relatives. A case in point, Massoumeh notices Ahmed's lustful eyes looking at Mrs. Parvin as she worked and her chador fell off. "Mr. Ahmad had also found another pastime at home: keeping an eye on our neighbour Mrs. Parvin's house from an upstairs window. Mrs. Parvin was usually busy doing something in the front yard and, of course, her chador would always fall off. Ahmad wouldn't move from his position in front of the living room window" (6). By continuously keeping a lustful eye on Mrs. Parvin, Ahmad ended up having a love affair with her hence violating sexual codes of conduct.

Grandmother cautions Mahboubeh to be careful with her chador whenever boys were around and especially those who were not close relatives. By not being mindful of her chador, Mahmoud always found himself looking at Mahboubeh lustfully whenever she came to their house. The narrator says, "Mahmoud would blush and start stammering. He would stand in a corner and watch Mahboubeh, especially when her chador slipped off her head. And Mahboubeh, God bless her, was so playful and giddy that she forgot to keep herself properly covered." (3) Thus the practice of veiling, other than being a demonstration of piety, it also served as a mark of identity and non – conformity to the colonizer's culture. In my view, this aspect vindicates the Muslim woman's identity in the Global South, subverting the notion of them being oppressed by such adornment.

A critical look at Massoumeh's depiction in terms of her adornment shows how the author tries to reconstruct and rewrite the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran by weaving the characters

with historical thread of the nation. She portrays a nation in the mission of reclaiming its cultural and religious identity through Massoumeh's commitment to veiling herself. Further, by presenting the Pro – West and anti-Western characters, Saniee demonstrates the impossibility of attaining cultural purity hence the construction of new identities as will be discussed later in the chapter.

#### **2.4.2 Women: Bearers of the Family's Collective Honour**

According to Masood, in a number of Muslim nations, family honour is associated with women's behavior thus, the collective honour of the society solely lies on women's demeanor. In this sense, men feel obligated to control women's modesty, which is further associated with the control of their bodies. Borrowing Michel Foucault's concept of power in *On Governmentality: Ideology and Consciousness* (1978), power is not essentially an oppressive tool rather, it can also be productive in maintaining moral order in a given society. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the woman is a symbol of her family's collective honour and by extension, the nation is mandated to adopt proper behaviour in order to maintain her Muslim identity.

At the beginning of Saniee's narrative, Massoumeh is made to promise that she would not bring shame and dishonor to her family when she is allowed to go to school in Tehran without a chador. "When we moved from Qum, Father allowed me to continue going to school. Later, when I told him, in Tehran girls don't wear chadors to school and I will be a laughing stock, he even let me wear a headscarf" (1) but she had to be careful not to uncover herself and bring dishonor. As Ali Mazrui has argued, some of the Islamic cultural aspects are more humane than the Westerners realize and have prevailed over a long time, yet they were perceived as medieval and backward.

The purity and chastity of the girl child are presented as symbols of the nation's purity hence jealously guarded against foreign exploitation and rape. Massoumeh's brothers Mahmoud, Ahmed and Ali are keen that their sister retains her purity even as she navigates life in Tehran. Ali keeps a watchful eye on her closeness with Parvaneh Ahmadi. On suspecting his sister's innocence, he follows her to school to ascertain that there was nothing fishy about their behavior.

To his astonishment, he discovered the developing love affair between Massoumeh and Saiid, a Chemist Assistant and the perpetrator was Parvaneh. Massoumeh is accused of flirting with a stranger in public bringing dishonor to her family. Embarrassed and ashamed, "mother slapped herself on the head and wailed, 'I pray to God that I see you on the slab in a morgue. Look what shame and dishonour you've brought us. What am I supposed to tell your father and brothers?' And she pinched my arm again" (42). Neither the mother nor the father could withstand such a shame despite the fact that the latter had always been on her side.

Sadeghi had re-enforced the principle that in Islam, a man's honour is dependent on a woman's honour. When Saiid's letters were brought and read in his hearing, he remarked, "I knew my mother was right. We can't have girls. Even if she recovers, she'll be as good as dead ... with all this shame and dishonour." (54). By this, he withdrew his support and walked away covering his head for the shame his daughter brought the family. For her mother, with her eyes full of tears, "mother beat her chest and cried, 'God, see what ruin has befallen me? Girl, may God make you suffer. What shamelessness was this? I wish you had died instead of Zari. Look at what you've done to me.' (50). Burning with anger and rage for the lost purity and innocence of his sister, Ali pulled out his weapons to attack the enemy. This rage can also be interpreted as the nations' towards the imperialists who continually exploited the natural resources hence affecting the

nation's culture and economy. As a mitigation strategy and restoring order, the family is compelled to source for any suitor to marry Massoumeh before she is plunged into another dishonorable deed.

Mrs. Parvin also narrates her personal experience to Massoumeh when she refused the idea of being married off to another man other than Saiid. Mrs. Parvin tells Massoumeh that she too was forced to marry a man she did not love. Her stepmother was concerned with her purity that she could not allow Amir – Hossein, whom she loved and wished to marry to continue visiting them. She says, "since my stepmother was so observant of the codes and tenets of purity and impurity" (76), they quickly arranged her marriage to Haji Agha so as not to bring the family dishonor. As the bearers of their family's collective honor and the nation by extension, a woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran had to abide by the set codes of conduct.

In her fifties, after all her children have departed to their respective homes and her husband gone, Massoumeh still feels obligated to maintain their honour and reputation. She is careful not to bring shame to her reputable children at the expense of her own happiness and peace by accepting Saiid's marriage proposal. She argues, "you don't understand, I said. I am afraid they would be embarrassed in front of their spouses. I have to think about their honour and reputation too" (430). In an attempt to challenge Massoumeh's school of thought, Parvaneh asserts her need to think of herself as well and pursue her desires as a normal human being. With her exposure to Western ways of life, she persuaded Massoumeh to follow her heart's desire by conceding to marry Saiid, the man she truly loved since childhood. As the bearer of her family's honour and reputation, she is torn between compromising for her own happiness or upholding her traditional belief of a widow. Unlike Massoud and Shirin, Siamak, her eldest son is not only concerned with the dishonor his mother's decision would bring the family but also the shame she would put on their deceased father's memory. Massoud emphasizes that her mother has her rights but she would not exercise



them at the expense of their honour. Feeling dejected and worthless, Massoumeh at the end decides to uphold her family's honour for peaceful coexistence.

## **2.5 Negotiating the Hybrid Space**

In reference to Bill Ashcroft et al's., postulation that almost three-quarters of the total "Third World" population was directly or indirectly affected by imperialism and colonialism, Iranian women were not left out. Despite the many strategies put in place to reclaim and retain the identity of The Islamic Republic of Iran as a religious state governed by Sharia laws - many of them affecting women, Westernization still advanced rapidly. Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* challenges the validity and authenticity of essentialist cultural identity by interweaving the elements of the colonizer and the colonized for hybridity. He argues that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains the difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). Due to colonial influence, the Third World woman is represented in the hybrid space. Hybridity thus opens up a new space for the construction of a new self.

To demonstrate her existence in the hybrid space, Massoumeh agrees to cover herself as her culture demands of her when going to public spaces so as to be allowed to continue with her education to more advanced levels. Her father supports her on the condition that she does not bring him shame. Massoumeh's mother, however, does not see the need for her daughter's education since this would nullify the prospect of a decent husband. She argues, "Massoumeh has her year six certificate and even studied an extra year. It's time for her to get married. Everyone says a girl who grows up in Tehran isn't all that good" (2) due to Western influence.

At school, Massoumeh finds herself in the same conundrum when she has to uphold her purity and at the same time remain friends with Parvaneh. In her school, she says, half the girls were Delkash fans including Parvaneh and the other half Marzieh fans, all Western artists that she had been warned to stay away from. Massoumeh's fear that Parvaneh would cease being her friend made her join the club and she learned and read more including the *Women's Day* magazines which were censored in her home. However, her school teacher at the end of the term still congratulated her for being a well-behaved and bright girl. Addressing Mr. Sadeghi, she said, "I congratulate you, your daughter is very special; not only is she doing well in her class, but she is very well mannered and pleasant" (11). With this assurance, Mr. Sadeghi is convinced that his daughter will become a very important person in the future.

Massoumeh's continuous interaction with other children in school who were pro-West exposed her to their ideologies and she slowly gained consciousness of her sexuality. At the age of sixteen, she falls in love with Saiid and she is congratulated by her classmates. However, this results in her confinement to the private realms as a way of taming her, upon her family's discovery. After her hasty marriage to a stranger, Massoumeh realizes Hamid's indifference towards their marriage as he was also forced into it. While in Hamid's house, she reads extensively and even pursues a course in Persian literature. Saniee employs this ironic twist in Massoumeh's life experience to demonstrate the impossibility of attaining cultural purity thus the contemporary Iranian woman exist in a hybrid space.

As a result of colonialism and interaction with foreign culture, the contemporary Iranian women live in hybrid space. Their quest for education and professionalism in various spaces gives them hybrid identities. Through female characters, Saniee presents the dilemma of the younger generation of women showing their need for intellectual empowerment to navigate the hard

economic times even as they endeavor to uphold their moral values and dignity. During the war with Iraq, Iran needed intellectual women to manage the economy as the men engaged in the battle. For instance, Uncle Abba's wife insists that her daughter Soraya attain a University degree and become a doctor. When Massoumeh's mother asked her why her daughter is not yet married, she defiantly replies, "actually, there are many good candidates around. But a girl like Soraya doesn't take a fancy to just anyone. In my family, everyone is educated: men and women. We're different from people who come from the provinces. Soraya wants to study and become a doctor, like my sister's daughters." (60) In this conversation, Soraya's mother is aware of the changing times and the place of education in a woman's life. She knows that by empowering her, she will be able to sail through and aid in the country's future development.

Massoumeh negotiates for her own space to think and make her own choices. As a middle-aged woman living in the third space, she defies falling to the whims of every man in society. When asked by her son Massoud to wear a chador as they go to ask for Atefeh's hand, she asserts:

Look, my dear, did you forget that we are human? That we think for ourselves and have our own principles and beliefs, and we cannot constantly transform ourselves into people we are not? Do you know how many times I have had to change how I cover myself because of what men saw fit? I wore a chador in Qum, I wore a headscarf in Tehran, I married your father and he didn't want me to wear any hijab at all, then came the revolution and I had to wear a long manteau and a headscarf, and when you wanted to marry Miss Ladan you wanted me to be elegant and fashionable. (403)

In the above rhetorical questions directed to Massoud, Massoumeh is trying to assert herself as a woman whose life has been shaped by different forces in history. While in Qum, she had to abide

by the rules of her conservative family, against Western lifestyle. In her marriage, Hamid's democratic and liberal ideologies dictated the direction her life took. After the revolution, she is made to wear long manteaux to show her allegiance to the theocratic regime. In other words, Massoumeh's life tell the whole history of the pre and post- revolutionary Iran. Saniee creatively intertwines her life with the nation's history in her adornment. As a mother, she negotiates for her own space to make her own decision and to be herself, especially on what to wear. By also admitting her piety and adherence to Islamic codes, Massoumeh demonstrates her new identity in the hybrid space.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter has delved into the depiction of Iranian women against the historical backdrop using Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* as a case study. The main thrust of the chapter focused on how imperial history has shaped Iranian women's lives. The argument I put forward is that Muslim women have oftentimes been accused of being culturally oppressed, as they are denied their individuality and the freedom of choice, especially on how to dress, who to marry and how to generally conduct themselves in public. However, reading Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate*, against the historical backdrop of Iran's revolution experience, I come to the realization that safeguarding the key tenets of Islam so as to reclaim lost identity and establish order in the society is critical in the formation of Iranian's own national identity. Saniee weaves the experiences of female characters like Massoumeh, Parvaneh, Faati, and Mrs. Parvin with the history of Iran in an attempt to reconstruct it.

As Masood observed, colonization was justified on the basis of the “Other’s” culture of veiling being perceived as oppressive, backward and uncivilized thus in need of the colonizer’s intervention. On the other hand, unveiling symbolized freedom, gender equality and a movement towards Western modernization which many studies in the mainstream feminism discourse presented as the epitome of women’s liberation. This chapter has demonstrated the need for investigating the cultural and historical context of women in the Global South in order to understand their concerns. Iranian women have their own unique experiences different from African Muslim women because, for one, they practice Shiism. Further, the study has shown that due to colonial experience, “Third World” women exist in the hybrid space. This ushers me into the next chapter where I discuss the representation of the contemporary Iranian woman.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE REPRESENTATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN WOMAN IN THE *BOOK OF FATE* BY PARINOUSH SANIEE

#### 3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I delve into the representation of the contemporary Iranian woman in the narrative, *The Book of Fate*, focusing on their portrayal in the third space and the interconnected factors that influence their lives in light with Crenshaw Kimberle's theory of intersectionality. The previous chapter of this study demonstrated how the history of colonialism and imperialism shaped the lives and experiences of women in the Global South, particularly, women in the Islamic Republic of Iran, subverting the Western feminist notion that the Muslim women therein are generally victims of their patriarchal religious system, thereby asserting their peculiar identity. Weaving the narrative with the Iranian history of revolution and the subsequent declaration of theocracy, Saniee shows how women played a central role in giving the nation its identity both culturally and nationally by rejecting the Western social norms.

Women in Muslim countries have continuously experienced drawbacks as concerns to their social status in a male-dominated society. In addition, they have repeatedly been misrepresented in the Western feminist scholarship whose aim has been to help their "unfortunate" and oppressed "sisters" in the other part of the world. Regrettably, their efforts have proved ineffectual due to the fact that they view the challenges of the "Third World" women from their own perspectives, paying little attention to their religious, cultural, traditional and most importantly their history of colonialism. In this chapter, the argument that I seek to advance is that Parinoush Saniee, in *The Book of Fate* narrates Iranian women's experiences and challenges from an insider point of view

considering the religious, cultural, economic and historical specificities. Through the narrator, Saniee unveils the real-life experiences of contemporary Iranian women showing the myriad of factors that contribute to their growth and oppression. Further, I extrapolate their experiences to those of other women in the Global South who have suffered alike.

### **3.1 Women's Representation in the Cultural Context of *The Book of Fate***

*The Book of Fate* is articulate in the protagonist's actions that challenge the monolithic representation of Muslim women in mainstream feminism. This is in line with the proponents of post-colonial feminism in the Global South who perceive such a view as an extension of colonialism. Chandra Mohanty for instance insists on situating the "Third World" women within their proper cultural and historical contexts rather than applying the Western lens of victimhood, oppression, hegemonic patriarchy and violence on them.

Trinh Minha also advances this postulation. She holds that women in the "Third World " are different and they live under varying cultures hence a general definition does not befit them, rather, a more specific study of their experiences within their particular cultural contexts. Thus, culture is the basis on which I intend to study the representation of the contemporary female gender in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Scholars have defined gender as a social construct. Alice Eagly, for instance in "Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Social Role Interpretation" refers to gender as "meanings that societies and individuals ascribe to male and female categories" (4). As controversial as the concept has proved, Ivan Illich in *Gender* (1982) adds his voice by arguing for the inherent nature of gender in both men's and women's acts; their speeches, gestures, grasps of reality, their spaces and patterns of living. As a matter of fact, he adds that it is a regulative force

that renders inevitable the collective and mutual dependence of men and women. In other words, Illich agrees to the complementarity of gender relations as they were in the pre-colonial periods.

Women writers in most Third World countries have concentrated their efforts and synergy in subverting the prevailing notions about their inferiority. They instead emphasize the importance of viewing these women not merely as passive and docile, rather as vital participants interacting with the laid structures in an attempt to assert some degree of autonomy. In her work, Mohanty acknowledges the fact that Third World women struggle against patriarchy but again insists on a contextual study of their oppression. From an insider point of view, Parinoush Saniee puts Iranian women into the feminist discourse purview for a more culturally-specific analysis and understanding of their experiences. It is in this regard that I seek to critically examine how Saniee's protagonist Massoumeh dramatizes visibility and intellect in *The Book of Fate*.

### **3.1.1 Women and Visibility**

Saniee's literary works draw attention to the significance of the everyday lives of contemporary Iranian women. A more holistic study of her novel *The Book of fate* reveals the novel's protagonist as a visible and conscious woman. In *A Room of Her Own* (2004), Virginia Woolf contends that despite the prevailing cultural limitations, women have found ways to visibilize themselves and express the profundity of their own experiences (emphasis added). Saniee's protagonist Massoumeh Sadeghi dramatizes visibility in *The Book of Fate*.

To begin with, her intelligence and brilliance in school bring her to the limelight among her classmates and brothers hence negating the notion about their (Third World Women) irrationality. At home, Mr. Sadeghi (Massoumeh's father) wishes her brothers were like her, "I



only wish your indolent brothers had a tiny bit of you in them (19).” Massoumeh’s prominence is due to her brilliance as I will discuss later. Although Mr. Sadeghi’s decision to allow Massoumeh to continue with her education wreaked havoc at home, still, he stood firm and affirmed her intellect and the hope of her becoming an important person in the future. Thus, the subject’s intelligence and talent brought her visibility when her society demanded that she be married off after attaining her year six certificate.

Throughout the narrative, the novelist demonstrates how Iranian women gradually gained their voices in the public spheres. Contrary to the belief of them being limited to the oppressive domestic spheres, Massoumeh emerges as a hybrid woman with a voice and upholding her religious principles after her marriage to Hamid. When Faati (her sister) lost her confidence and voice against patriarchy, she became the family’s “fighting cock” negotiating space on her behalf. At work, Massoumeh penetrates the political space and ends up being nominated as the representative of the revolutionary committee because of her resilience and industry. Her admittance of not knowing much as far as political matters are concerned is interpreted as inherent modesty expected of her gender. She is publicly praised for single-handedly managing her children while her husband is in prison, proof of her visibility in the public domain.

The fact that Massoumeh succeeds in getting a job at the government agency and later becomes an expert in Persian Literature is an indication that the Iranian Muslim women are not in any way illiterate as propounded in the feminism discourse. She still plays a key role in her house as a mother. As Jacqueline Ki – Zerbo in *The General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory* (1981) asserts, a woman is a hearth that puts a family together and the needle sewing its different members, thus the reason they ought not to be relegated.

Massoumeh's representation as a role model of the contemporary Iranian women shows her consciousness as a reflection of the visible woman in a cultural context where men generally have an upper hand in the public realms. Saniee, therefore, challenges the discourse about her inferiority, irrationality and represents her as rational and autonomous in the hybrid space. A space that according to Bhabha reverses the idea of Western domination and hegemony.

### **3.1.2 Women and Intellect**

A closer study of *The Book of Fate* portrays contemporary Iranian women as intelligent and astute. Contrary to their perceived backwardness and primitiveness, Saniee demonstrates how these women are just as knowledgeable as their "fortunate" sisters in the "First worlds." Massoumeh's intelligence is first noticed in school in Tehran. Having excelled in her class, Mrs. Bahrami, the literature teacher, acknowledges her talent and passion for literature. She heartily congratulates her, "Well done! You're very talented (18) and comments that her talent would take her far. Later, in her matrimonial home, Massoumeh takes pleasure in reading a wide range of books for her intellectual empowerment. She says;

I had plenty of free time and spent most of it reading Hamid's books. I started with works of fiction and moved on to the poetry books, which I read carefully. Then I read philosophy books, which were very boring and difficult. Eventually, having nothing else to do, I even read his old textbooks. (117)

As is often said, knowledge is power, Massoumeh's reading helped her gain exposure and a different worldview altogether. Determined never to remain traditional and illiterate she used the opportunity at her disposal to empower herself. Later while having a conversation with Hamid

about the injustices inflicted on the masses and his unrelenting urge to resist such tyranny, Massoumeh remembers the poem she had read. In the spirit of comradeship, she recites:

If you rise, if I rise

everyone will rise.

If you sit, if I sit, who will rise?

Who will fight the foe? (122)

Surprised at her mastery of the poem and its relevance at such a critical time when unity is paramount, Hamid congratulates her for her intellect and recommends she join the group. He remarks, “Wow! Bravo! I guess you do understand a thing or two. Sometimes you say things that one doesn’t expect hearing from someone your age and with your education. It seems we can put you on the path” (122). Although his words connote some degree of prejudice and stereotype, evidently, he least expected such wisdom to ooze from Massoumeh knowing her low level of education, however, because of the books she had barricaded her head in, she managed to display her “manly” brains. With her intelligence, Massoumeh was not swayed by their ideologies given the situation of the country albeit she read and understood Karl Marx and Engels’ philosophies of socialism. She tried her best to win her husband to her side and save his life but her efforts proved futile.

As an intelligent wife, Massoumeh knew what interested her husband and would quicken his recuperation from post-prison depression. She thought carefully and suggested a trip to the Caspian Coast where Hamid could enjoy nature and play with the kids after spending four years

behind locked bars. While there, she took her time to share with him all she had read in his books as proof of her worth not only as a housewife. She says:

That memorable trip brought us closer together than ever before. I knew Hamid expected more of me than just being a housewife. I read as much as I could and started discussing with him what I had learned from his books over the years. I tried to fill the empty place of his friends by sharing ideas and talking about social and political issues. Little by little, he realized that I, too, had an awareness of politics and societal issues, and he even came to appreciate my intelligence and good memory. To him, I was no longer a backward child or uneducated woman. One day when I recited a section of a book he had forgotten, he said, 'It is such a shame that with all your talent you didn't pursue your education. Why don't you take the university entrance exams? I am sure if you continue studying you will make huge progress. (266)

This justifies the protagonist's intelligence as a result of her intensive and extensive reading. Hamid also acknowledges her transformation, saying: "You have changed so much! You seem mature and well-read. You sound like a philosopher, a psychologist. He encourages Massoumeh to continue pursuing her academic dreams. Even though she admits that life's hardships brought the transformation, she also acknowledges the impact of his books "I had to; I had to (read) to understand so that I could choose the right paths (272). Later, she cultivates and imparts this reading culture in her children Siamak, Massoud and Shirin.

Parvaneh Ahmadi, despite living in Germany, insists on her children speak the Persian language (Farsi) so that they are not alienated from their culture. On her visit, Massoumeh notices that Siamak has not forgotten his Persian language and speaks it fluently. Siamak tells her, "Aunt

Parvaneh refuses to talk to me if I speak in any language other than Persian. She is even more unrelenting with her own kids. Isn't she, Lili?' (375). With their intelligence, these women endeavour to empower their children intellectually by exposing them to different worlds but careful that they don't deviate from their cultural and religious identity. This affirms Parinoush Saniee's statement about the uniqueness of Iran in her efforts to protect her own culture and language in an interview by Cristina Foarfa in *bookaholic.ro* on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2013.

Massoumeh further advises Siamak and Lili to marry formally and if it does not work, they divorce as opposed to a long engagement - staying together and later separating. She says that such (engagement) is unthinkable in the Iranian culture. In brief, the intelligence of contemporary Iranian women has aided and still helps in navigating life in a post-colonial Iran where women are viewed as less intelligent compared to their male counterparts. Again, this is a legacy of colonialism. Saniee's portrayal of Massoumeh's intelligence thus deconstructs the general categorization of "Third World women" as being inherently ignorant and backward.

### **3.1.3 Women and Motherhood**

In most traditional and religious societies, the concept of womanhood is intertwined with motherhood. Arandell Terry in her article, "Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship," posits that a "woman is defined through her role as a mother; womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience" (1192). Terry thus hypothesizes that mothering and motherhood are "dynamic social interactions and relationships located in a societal context organized by gender and in accordance with the

prevailing gender belief systems” (1193). Like in other nations in the Global South, the attainment of womanhood is pegged on motherhood. Aduke Adebayo’s work, *Feminism and Black Women’s Creative Writing Theory, Practice and Criticism* (1996) affirms, “the myth of the omnipresent nurturing mother is everywhere because of the reproduction service a woman performs in the society” (178). In Iran, after the 1979 Revolution, the state insisted on creating a pre-modern concept of a wife and a mother as a way of rejecting Western norms and producing a perfect Muslim woman, abiding by the Sharia laws to the latter. Therefore, the figure of a woman in Iran embodies fidelity to the nation’s identity. Through their nurturing role, they are able to produce a generation of loyal citizens to uphold Islamic values.

In tune with the social constructness of gender and gender roles, Shokoofehsadat Hosseini’s Master Thesis titled, “A Feminist Analysis of Parinoush Saniee’s *The Book of Fate*” avers that the female characters in the novel are defined by the characteristics regarded as acceptable for women in the Iranian society. In this regard, Shokoofehsadat points out the way men and women conform to their defined gender roles. Despite the controversies around the subject of gender roles, Elaine Showalter in *American Gynocriticism* (1993), holds that the maternal and spiritual motives are the key driving force of their work. Massoumeh embraces and prides herself in her role as a mother of three and does not allow any interference with her dignity and honor by depending on charity. She asserts, “as a woman and a mother, I have a duty to manage my life and my children’s lives” (249). Although she meets varying degrees of challenges, her children give her hope in hopelessness and she sacrifices her desires for their sake.

Parinoush Saniee portrays Massoumeh as a strong-willed, determined and responsible mother. Equipped with her education and her willpower, she reclaims her ability to make decisions and manage her life together with her children in the absence of her husband. She says, “finally,

on one beautiful May day, I reclaimed my ability to make decisions. I told myself that I was a mother and had responsibilities, that I had to be strong and stand on my own two feet, and that I had to raise my son in a happy, healthy environment. Everything changed. The joy of life flowed inside me” (149). Here the new strong-willed and determined Massoumeh is born out of the womb of suffering and discrimination ready to take life’s challenges head-on as a mother.

According to Abu – Lughod Lila in her work, *Remaking Women* (1998), the Islamic Republic emphasized women’s potential to perform as a perfect nurturer in the house. Massoumeh executes her responsibility as a mother of two teenage boys who are expected to be well versed with revolutionary ideologies. She takes her time to teach and caution them about their involvement in it. For instance, when Siamak felt aged enough and started rebelling, wanting to pursue the wrong cause by joining the *Mujahedin* (Muslims who fight on behalf of their faith) that she saw would only bring his destruction, she stands on her two feet and asserts her role as a mother. She tells Siamak, “You are my child. If I am not strong enough to stop you, then I might as well die” (322). Afraid of losing him as she lost his father, Massoumeh insists on distancing himself from the country’s politics. Moreover, Massoumeh’s advice to her daughter Shirin as she contemplates marriage, “you know what your rights are and you will not let anyone violate them, you respect religious and social norms, you are smart and sensible, and you have foresight. I know you will not give in to whim and impulse” (401) proves that the contemporary Iranian lives in the hybrid space. She is assertive, educated yet retains her cultural and religious identity.

Saniee portrays Massoumeh as a petrified mother unlike Ehteram – Sadat, her maternal cousin who supports her son’s decision to join the army to defend the country. The latter prides herself in her identity as the mother of a martyr. Massoumeh’s mother says, “she is a martyr’s mother; her status is much higher than yours. God holds her in the highest esteem” (370). Although

Orientalism discourse depicted martyrdom as oppressive and backward, it was a religious identity marker to the Iranians during the war with Iraq. Gholam Ali argues:

Look how the enemy has destroyed people's lives. It is my duty to defend Islam, my country and our people. Do you really want to stand in the way of my religious obligation?" Mother is really a woman of faith. I think her belief is far stronger than my father's. She said, "Who am I to challenge God? I am satisfied with his satisfaction. (352)

When her son Massoud came back home alive, though wounded, Massoumeh organized a party to celebrate his return but sympathized with Ehteram – Sadat for losing her son Gholam Ali in the war. His words to Massoumeh justify his unflinching belief in martyrdom as he had been taught by his mother.

On the day her house was raided by the Revolutionary Guards, she represents herself "as a captain whose ship was sinking and whose passengers were looking at him with hope in their eyes" (297). The image of a captain whose ship is sinking refers to her broken spirit at the arrest of her husband yet she still has to wear a brave face and give hope to her passengers (children) as a good mother.

According to Karami Ronak's article titled, "Mr. Hashemi and the Family Dynamics in Iran", the reason behind the Islamic regime's encouragement of women's education was mainly because it required mothers who were familiar with revolutionary values hence could comfortably nurture their children in line with them. Massoumeh exemplifies this by supporting her ten-year-old son, Massoud's fine penmanship in writing revolutionary slogans on walls. She says:



Sometimes he wrote them on large sheets of paper and if he had time he even adorned them with various designs. Every day, he went running through the streets with a group of other children. Despite the danger, I couldn't stop them. In the end, I had to join his group as a lookout. I would stand guard at the corner so that they could safely write their slogans and then I would correct their spelling mistakes. This way, I could keep an eye on my son and share his support of the revolution. (278)

The above words show how dedicated Massoumeh was to the growth and wellbeing of her children amidst the prevailing tension. As an educated and enlightened mother, she takes her time to train her children on the pros and the cons of the revolution as well as other political ideologies that emerged later. With wisdom, she starts by acknowledging how decent and kind Hamid was before disclosing his shortcomings. She goes ahead to challenge them to read widely in order to establish their own viewpoints instead of depending on other people's ideas. She advises them thus;

I want you to rely on your own thoughts and beliefs, to weigh the good and bad of everything by reading and learning, and then make decisions and draw conclusions. Sheer ideology will trap you, it will make you prejudiced, it will obstruct individual thought and opinion, and create bias. And ultimately, it will turn you into a one-dimensional fanatic. (378)

Representing the contemporary women in Iran, and by extension, Global South, Massoumeh juggles various responsibilities such as motherhood, career and education. She says, "My responsibilities now included those of a mother, a housekeeper, an office worker, a university student and the wife of a prisoner. And I tended to the last with the greatest care" (235). Her life is a typical reflection of the experiences of most contemporary women who juggle all these

responsibilities. She says that she took every available opportunity to study during her free time at the office, early in the morning, and at night before going to bed. As an industrious woman and committed to nothing short of excellence, she is employed on the basis of her vast knowledge in Persian Literature. Portraying herself as a role model, she asserts;

Over time, I learned how to manage my workload and grew accustomed to it. It was then that I realized we are capable of far more than we believe. After a while, we adapt to life and our rhythm adjusts to the volume of our tasks. I was like a runner on the track of life and Hamid's voice saying 'I am proud of you' echoed in my ears like the applause of spectators in a huge stadium, intensifying my strength and agility. (235)

She tells Parvaneh that managing life is not all that difficult, what pins her down most is the loneliness she suffers because of Hamid's absence. Mrs. Parvin later became so helpful to her in taking care of the children on the examination days, hence the spirit of sisterhood. Upon being purged by the 'Eradication Committee', Massoumeh survived on her translating and editorial skills. Her parents-in-law were however concerned about the children being neglected as she went to pursue her University degree.

Further, in their discussion about members of Hamid's group's betrayal, Massoumeh disapproves of Sharzard's. She negates Hamid's belief that Sharzard betrayed them based on the motherliness that she noticed during the short period of their interaction. For the four months she stayed with them, she displayed motherliness towards Massoud that she would not like to deprive him of anything in life. She tells Hamid:

As a woman, as a mother, she could not deprive Massoud of a father and make an orphan of him. Even though she believed in the fight for freedom, even though her goal was the welfare of all children, once she experienced maternal feelings, like all mothers she made an exception for her own child. Like all mothers, the well-being of her child and the dreams she had for him became a greater priority. (270)

Like Massoumeh, Sharzard is also depicted as a tender-hearted mother. Despite her commitment to fighting against oppression, she remained a woman with a strong desire for children. Massoumeh challenges her husband that being a fighter is not an impediment to attaining womanhood. Although she presented herself as the embodiment of the “liberated” woman- less concerned with family, inwardly she was a mother. Her last words to Massoumeh, “no matter how, you must protect your family and raise your children in a safe and happy environment. Massoud is very sensitive. He needs a mother and a father. He is fragile” (271) testifies to her deep feelings towards motherhood and her struggles with herself not having attained it.

Parinoush Saniee, therefore, represents Massoumeh as a caring and resilient mother in the way she nurtures her children despite the hard economic times and Hamid’s imprisonment. Her lifelong friend Parvaneh; Parvin, a neighbor who acts as her advisor and the caretaker of her and her children; and Shahrzad, a member of Hamid's underground communist group often comes to her aid. The latter for instance helps Massoumeh see herself in a different positive light.

Overwhelmed with a feeling of inferiority and envy towards Shahrzad’s capabilities and achievements, Shahrzad reassuring words, “I am nobody, you are much better and more complete than me, too much a lady, a good and loving wife, and a kind and wise mother, eager to read and learn, and willing to make sacrifices for your family” (237) restore hope and strength in her. According to (Nayera 229), Shahrzad's name could be an allusion to the legendary female of the

*One Thousand- and One-Nights* fairy tale. The “Shahzadian” tradition is where a woman is seeking survival and victory over unfair male domination and she eventually wins through perseverance, resilience and creativity. This, in essence, is a true reflection of Massoumeh’s life experience as a mother and a wife of a political prisoner in Iran. Thus motherhood in *The Book of Fate* is significant and central to the Iranian woman question as they nurture generations about fidelity to their nation’s ideologies.

### **3.2 The Economic Status of the Woman in Contemporary Iranian Society**

Women in the Global South are differently situated in the socio-economic structures of their countries. Besides cultural and political spheres, the economy of the colonized nations was adversely affected by colonialism. At the time of independence, most of these country’s economies were already deteriorating. The most affected by this were the women since they had to shoulder the burden of single parenthood, the stigma that came with it and childcare responsibility amidst the prevailing political conditions of the country. In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies,” Kimberle Crenshaw adds her voice to the often ignored concept of the colonial historical impacts on women in the colonized Third World nations. She argues that “while feminism purports to speak for women of color through its invocation of the term “woman,” the feminist perspective excludes women of color because it is based upon the experiences and interest of a certain subset of women” (1244).

Kimberle’s intersectionality feminism framework seeks to DE marginalize the position of the subaltern women whose “compounded” situation has historically been absorbed into or

generally ignored by the mainstream feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989). She insists on probing history to establish the intertwinement of various aspects that influence women's lives in the Global South in order to properly understand their predicament. It is my opinion that the female protagonist in *The Book of Fate* is a representative of the Iranian social life as she exhibits the socio-economic conditions of the post-independent Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **3.2.1 The Socio– Economic Burden of Single Motherhood**

The prevailing political situations in Iran are responsible for the novel's protagonist's experience of single parenthood burden at an early stage in her life. Her husband, Hamid - a young thirty-year-old communist committed his life to fight the injustices meted on the masses by the ruling regime. This compelled Massoumeh to brace up and saddle herself with the fatherly responsibilities bequeathed to her by the continuous absence of her husband. A number of times, she bore the pain of caring for her children with limited resources. For instance, at the outbreak of cholera, both Siamak and Massoud contracted the disease and she had to seek medical attention with the little money Hamid left her before disappearing for seven months. In pain and agony for going through this ordeal alone without a penny, Massoumeh laments,

I ran out of money. I had spent the sum Hamid had given me as well as the money I had saved. I had already borrowed from Father to pay for the children's hospitalization and I couldn't say anything to Hamid's father and make him more worried than he was. I had even borrowed some money from Mrs Parvin, but that was all gone, too. (164)

Massoumeh is devastated by the fact that her husband was busy following his own ideas neglecting his responsibility as a father. Upon his imprisonment under the Shah's regime, she felt the sting of single motherhood with no support from her spouse. The printing house, which remained as the only source of income having been purged, Massoumeh had no other source of income. She asserts:

Time was passing and there was no indication that the printing house would be allowed to reopen. Every month, Hamid's father gave me some money for us to live on, but how long could that go on? I had to make a decision. I had to find a job. I was neither a child, nor incapable. I was a woman responsible for two children and I didn't want to raise them on the charity of others. Sitting still, whining and holding my hand out in front of this and that person was beneath me, beneath my children, and especially beneath Hamid. We had to live with honour and pride; we had to stand on our own two feet. But how? What work could I do? (221)

Massoumeh's strong spirit of independence is depicted here. She is determined to defy the norms that confine and limit women's operation within the domestic spheres in order to fend for her children. Circumstances and hardships continue to shape her life. While visiting him in prison, Hamid comments on her remarkable transformation. In my view, Massoumeh's ordeal calls for a rethinking of single-parenthood, especially under circumstances of war. Although at this juncture, her husband was still alive but locked behind bars, she had already started experiencing the difficulties and loneliness of a single mother struggling to make ends meet during the revolution.

Research done in the area of single parenthood reveals the assumption that the non – imprisoned parent is as well at fault. According to Helen Codd in *In the Shadow of Prison* (2011), the family members often report experiences of disrespect, hostility and humiliation from society.

Massoumeh goes through the same at the prison gate while making efforts to visit her husband. Parvin Huda in her article, “Singled Out: A Critique of the Representation of Single Motherhood in Welfare Discourse” attempts to paint the picture of what single motherhood entails. In her introduction, she states that for one, you have to be a full-time mother, a breadwinner, a nursemaid and always be there for the children. Women have proved themselves capable of performing all these roles. However, the dilemma comes when the boys need a mentor - a father figure to look up to. In her conversation with Hamid after his release, Massoumeh complains of his absence and lack of support in raising the children. She asserts;

Look, Hamid, all these years I have put up with all sorts of misery and I have never demanded anything from you. I have respected your ideas and ideals even though I do not believe in them. I have tolerated loneliness, fear, anxiety and your absences. I have always put your needs first. I have suffered middle-of-the-night raids, my life being turned upside down, and years of insults and humiliation behind the prison gates. I have single-handedly shouldered the burden of our life and raised the children. (274)

Overwhelmed by the burden of single parenthood during the difficult economic times, Massoumeh expresses her anger towards her husband’s priorities. She sharply criticizes his ideology and fights against the Islamic regime, advising him to settle down and think about his children. However, her pleadings end up in vain. Hamid is imprisoned again after the revolution and this time executed for opposing the theocratic regime. Unlike Mr. Shirzadi's dreams which ended up being nothing more than “the hope for death or the death of hope” (311), Massoumeh’s children became her only source of hope and meaning of life.

Despite the tough economic times, as a result of imperialism, she had to find a way of providing for her three children. She says, “the economy was bad and no one was hiring new employees. I even thought about making pickles and preserves and selling them to grocery stores or taking orders for cakes, pastries, or other foods. But how? I had no experience” (310). Massoumeh’s life has been shaped by the tough experiences she has gone through. This shows how women suffer in times of war. Mrs. Parvin’s business of sewing is affected as people are no longer interested in custom-made clothes. At the end of the narrative, she turns out to be a strong independent character. Though beaten up by the stormy sea, her resilience and commitment to her children’s success are outstanding.

### **3.2.2 Navigating the Stigma of Single Motherhood in Iranian Society**

In their quest for a more humane and respectful way of addressing incarcerated individuals and their relatives, (Tran Nguyen and Stephanie Dawson et al., 23) argue that stigma on these people can be enacted and reinforced through labeling which results in stereotype, prejudice and discrimination. Single motherhood has been denigrated throughout history for various reasons. In the section, “History Devaluing Black Mothers and Families,” Parvin Huda provides a historical glimpse of the origin of this denigration tracing it from the years of slavery and colonialism. She writes;

The claim that single mother families are deviant presumes that the nuclear unit is foundational, a fact at odds with the history of the black community. During the slavery era, black families were denied the right to form and maintain nuclear family units; mothers, fathers and children were routinely separated from one



another. A long history of economic subordination of black men, including underemployment, unemployment and job discrimination has also impeded the formation of black marital nuclear families. (366)

Thus, the history of single motherhood and the problems around it result from factors such as death, divorce and slavery. The stigma added to the already bleeding souls worsens their situations hence its urgency. As Tran Nguyeh and Stehanie Dawson et al., have argued, the victim's family are "Othered," considered dangerous hence excluded from the social and economic spaces.

Massoumeh, the subject and victim for this matter, suffers in the hands of her employer because she suddenly acquired a stamp on her forehead identifying her as the widow of an executed communist. She is stigmatized by this labeling and wonders how she could save herself and her children from such a tag. She is suddenly dismissed from work for being the wife of a communist. With a sneer, she is shooed away as, "the widow of a communist who was executed and the mother of a traitor and dissenter" (338). Her children are not spared either. They are seen as "the seeds and spawns of that faithless miscreant" (316) which deserve execution as well. Her case is further traumatized by the lustful overtures of her husband's family members, who are less concerned about her welfare and the future of her children. Her mother-in-law says, "without Hamid, what do I need them for " (307). As if this was not enough, she is told to move out of the house since customarily, if the husband dies before his father, the wife does not get any inheritance. Massoumeh remains alone with her three children, unaware of where to start from. She remarks;

All the doors had closed on me. Without a job, without Hamid, without his father, without a home, without any inheritance, and with the stamp on my forehead identifying me as the widow of an executed communist, how was I going to save my children from that stormy sea and deliver them to safety? (308)

The metaphor of the sea connotes the stigma attached to their condition. The excruciating pain becomes unbearable when the whole family is “Othered” - children rejected in school and the mother laid off from work because of their dead communist father. The novelist, in essence, demonstrates how single motherhood experience at times is inescapable as it results from an amalgamation of factors hence calls for a rethinking due to its detrimental effects on families. Massoumeh’s miseries as a single mother emanate from the ideological differences between individuals – those who support Islam and those in support of Western values.

### **3.3 Women’s Representation in the Ideological War**

Iran’s 1979 Revolution, as Abrahamian Ervand in *A History of Modern Iran* (2008) puts it, “erupted like a volcano because of the overwhelming pressures that had built up” (155) over the years of exploitation and oppression. The need for the formation of a new identity, culture and governance was its main driving force. The clerics and other intellectuals stood firm against the violation of the key values of Islam and sought to re-establish these religious values in the country. In her narrative *The Book of Fate*, Parinoush Saniee locates the woman figure at the center of the ideological battle between different political factions.

Hamid, Massoumeh’s husband, propagated communism ideology. He committed himself to fight the injustices meted on the Iranian populace. The ideals he perpetuated entailed freedom and democracy. Among his ideas, is the belief that women’s oppression is rooted in the patriarchal society they are brought up in. Although he does not mind having someone to prepare him breakfast and make a home for him – a wife, he opposes the existing gender binaries and the traditional views of marriage. According to him, women ought not to be confined within the

domestic realms, rather be set free to pursue their dreams. He confesses, “I am not your jailer. Being married doesn’t mean impeding your spouse’s interest. On the contrary it means supporting them” (164). Hamid’s view that marriage is all about companionship, collaboration, understanding, acceptance of each other’s desires and equal rights suddenly illuminated Massoumeh’s dark and hopeless path after her forced marriage. On the contrary, Hamid’s mother propels her “old-fashioned” view of women. She advises her daughter-in-law to exercise her role as a woman; having children one after the other so as to keep her husband at home. She says,

You are a woman. Flirt, coquette, sulk and charm. In short, don’t let him stay out late at night and in the morning send him to work on time. You have to cut his friends out of your life. And, God willing, get pregnant soon. Don’t give him a break. Once he has a couple of kids around him, he will forget all about his tomfooleries. Show me your grit” (107).

By this Massoumeh is caught in a dilemma not knowing whether to follow Hamid who has shown her kindness by allowing her to pursue education or his mother. The latter’s idea was meant to make Hamid change his mind about his ideals. Aware of her son’s pursuits, she knew that marriage responsibility would snatch him from propagating his communist ideology thus saving his life.

According to Abu - Lughod, the confinement of women within the domestic realm, the gendered separation of the private and public spaces and the general exclusion of women from public spheres were all premised on the virtues of chastity and moral decency, unlike Hamid who perceived this as oppressive. Since the Islamic regime focused on reconstructing the nation based on the tenets of Islam, Abu – Lughod points out that the figure of the woman became a metaphor for a vulnerable nation in need of protection.

While in their home, Massoumeh's belief is shaken by one of Hamid's friends and this led to her miscarriage. Akbar views her belief in God as pure superstition since they don't add any value to the oppressed masses. He contends, "they are elements that make you dependent on someone other than yourself. And they are all meant to scare you into being content with what you have and to stop you from fighting for what you don't have, all in the hope that in another world you will receive everything" (200). He urges Hamid that a campaign against religion ought to be part of their mandate. After the ordeal of miscarriage, Sharzard tells Massoumeh that with time her belief will develop and be anchored on a more solid foundation based on her own perception, research and knowledge and not on what she has memorized. Again Massoumeh is trapped because she admires Sharzard's intellect and eloquence hence suffers inferiority complex in her presence. The novelist here demonstrates the protagonists' ambivalence, she stands in between modernity and tradition. Massoumeh accepts education and becomes one of the intellectuals but again keeps her Iranian tradition and Muslim identity. She later advises her son Siamak not to depart from his Iranian culture despite living abroad.

After the revolution and the establishment of an Islamic government, the differences of opinions and personal inclinations which had previously been veiled for the pursuit of a common enemy are revealed through Mahmoud and Hamid. As Mahmoud expressed satisfaction and contentment in the establishment of an Islamic government that would implement Islamic values, Hamid showed his discontentment. Hamid accused such a government of being dogmatic, dry – minded and traditional in all spheres while Mahmoud accused him of being an atheist and an infidel. This sharp argument resulted in the imprisonment and the eventual execution of Hamid. Again I restate that all the challenges that Massoumeh experienced as a representative of contemporary Iranian women are pegged on the country's history of imperialism and the struggle

it. She is positioned at the center of this significant history that has shaped her fifty years of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the representation of contemporary Iranian women in Parinoush Saniee's novel *The Book of Fate*. In the analysis of their representation, I narrowed my attention to the cultural and economic contexts as well as the infiltration of Western ideologies. It is my opinion that Massoumeh's life experience as she narrates is a true reflection of the lives of most contemporary women in the Global South and Iran in particular. In the cultural context I have argued that as mothers existing in the hybrid space, these women exhibit intellect and visibility in the public domain thus deconstructing the notions around their irrationality, backwardness and primitiveness as purported in the mainstream feminism discourse. Further, I have also demonstrated how the revolution affected their social and economic lives, relegating them to the margins of society.

The different ideologies that the character in the novel express is a true depiction of the legacies of colonialism on the colonized individuals. As scholars have argued that colonialism affected every individual. In many "Third World" countries, the elites colluded with the colonizers for their perpetual benefit from the country's resources as the native suffered exploitation and poverty. Guided by the theory of intersectionality, I have also demonstrated that Iranian women have been oppressed by a collage of factors having their roots in imperialism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NARRATIVE STRATEGIES USED TO REPRESENT IRANIAN WOMAN IN PARINOUSH SANIEE'S *THE BOOK OF FATE*

#### 4.1 Introduction

In the present chapter, I examine the artistic crafting of the narrative in *The Book of Fate*. In order to achieve this, I focus on some key aspects of narratology employed in the text to effectively present and represent the Global South woman, particularly in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Chapters two and three of this study looked into the depiction of Iranian women against their historical backdrop as well as their representation respectively. This approach demonstrated how history plays a critical role in understanding women's experiences in the Global South, with particular focus to The Islamic Republic of Iran. Parinoush Saniee's artistic works weave history with the lives of women showing how their experiences have generally been impacted by the history of foreign domination. By allowing the female protagonists both in *The Book of Fate* and *I Hid My Voice* to narrate their experiences, I posit that Saniee "demarginalizes" these women to give them a voice and urgency and in that process achieves authenticity in her narratives. In this chapter then, I divert my attention to the aesthetics of *The Book of Fate* that renders it an artistic piece worth an in-depth literary evaluation. The methodology I adopt here is in examining how the vehicle delivers the content of the story, focusing on the narrative elements that aid in the representation of Iranian women.

Since postcolonial discourses are concerned with the history of specific colonized nations and re-writing it, fiction presents historical facts and knowledge in a very compelling way in the

sense that both make use of the narrative structure. In his article, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument in the Writing of History and Historical Understanding", Louis Mink brings to our attention the link between history and fiction. He observes that both can be viewed as "a primary and irreducible form of human comprehension, important in the constitution of common sense" (132) but distinctively points out how narratives are explanatory and embedded with factual knowledge. White Hayden in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1992) argues almost in the same direction that the historical text is a literary artifact because the process of creative imagination involves the writer of fiction as much as it does the historian. In essence, both fiction and history share some similarities in the principle of selectivity, deriving their material from specific cultures and historical experiences.

Pegged on these postulations, I argue that *The Book of Fate* adopts a peculiar narrative structure that is intertwined with specific historical times of the nation, carefully selected to depict how they impacted the lives of women therein hence my voyage to evaluate the various narrative elements critical in understanding the representation of the contemporary Iranian woman.

According to Bal Mieke, narratology concerns how narratives make meaning through a narrative agent or subject who conveys a story to the audience and the basic mechanisms and procedures common to all acts of storytelling. Etymologically, narratology refers to the science of narratives that dissects its various components with the aim of meaning derivation. This meaning is achieved through subjective attention to the structure of the narrative text. Therefore, narratologists foreground the structure of the text which they maintain is inseparable from the language - the medium of delivery.

In her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Bal defines the term narratology thus, "the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles,

events; cultural artifacts that tell a story” (3). Such a framework, she adds, aids in understanding, analyzing and evaluating narratives. In Bal’s view, a narrative is a fictitious tale or connected sequence of events with some degree of truth, narrated by a narrator to a narratee (a notional figure within the textual space). In other words, a narrative consists of a semiotic representation of a series of events (story) constructed and arranged in a meaningful and orderly manner known as the plot.

Advancing more on this discourse, Gerard Genette contends that every text reveals traces of narration that can be looked into in order to understand how narratives are organized in a coherent manner. In tune with Bal, Gerard points out that narratology is concerned with the internal mechanisms of narratives and the form adopted in the narrated story. His work, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* not only addresses the tale itself but also on how it is told, that is, the process of narration hence presents the tenets of narrative discourse as order, voice, mood, duration and frequency. Parting with Gerard, the question that this study seeks to investigate is how the narrative strategies aid in recounting the stories of women in *The Book of Fate*. In this regard, I focus on the narrating voice and point of view, the narrative order, the setting, use of dialogue, use of letters and intertextuality as some of the key tenets and strands of narratology employed in presenting the Iranian women against the historical backdrop and their representation in the hybrid space. Of significance, is how Saniee artistically presents and represents them in the literary space.



## 4.2 The Narrative Voice and Point of View

The concept of the narrator is pivotal in the evaluation of a narrative text. According to Bal Mieke, “the identity of the narrator, the degree and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, as well as the choices that are implied, lend the text its specific character” (18). Here, Bal points out the centrality of the narrator (one telling the story) in any narrative instance. Gerard Genette foregrounds three basic components that make up a narrative. These are: “the story, the narrative (statements that comprise the discourse in the text) and narrating (the act of producing the narrative)” (27) Gerard, thus emphasizes particular fundamental facets of a textual matter. He draws a line between the narrating voice and focalization by referring to the former as the narrator and the latter as the perspective from which the story has been told. Hence, the narrator and point of view (perspective) together determine the narrative situation.

Traditionally, narratives have been known according to the ‘voice’ of the narrator narrating a story to the narratee. According to Gerard, this voice refers to “who speaks?” or, who’s voice is used in the narrative text? The narrative voice, therefore, adopts a particular point of view or perspective from which to observe and recount the events in the story. The three known points of view mostly deployed in narratives are the first- person in which the narrator tells the story from their own perspective, second-person in which the narrator addresses the reader directly and the third-person omniscient point of view whereby the narrator tells a story about other people. In each of these points of view (perspectives), a different experience is related to the reader due to the varying amount of information they have access to.

The narrative voice in Saniee’s *The Book of Fate* is that of Massoumeh. In retrospect, she recounts her past personal life experiences in pre and post-revolutionary Iran. By using the first-

person point of view, the reader is furnished with information regarding the narrator's feelings, emotions and general view of life. Unlike the third-person omniscient narrative voice that "knows it all" in other words, has full access to the thoughts and experiences of other characters in the story, readers of fictional narratives written in the first –person are limited to understanding the events only through what the narrators are able to perceive.

The narrative in *The Book of Fate* is presented through the first-person, "I" point of view. Being a coming-of-age story of Massoumeh, her voice dominates the whole story. At the onset, she tells the story from a child's perspective recalling her childhood experiences in Tehran. She is portrayed as a conservative woman in contrast to Parvaneh. With her strong religious background, she is concerned about the indecent behavior of her friend. She says: "No matter how many times I said, 'It's not proper, let's go', she just ignored me. Once she even shouted out to me from across the street, and worse yet, she called me by my first name. I was so embarrassed I prayed I would just melt and vanish into the earth" (1). From her own perspective, the reader is exposed to the conflicting ideologies between the conservative Iranians determined to uphold their religious and cultural integrity and the liberals represented by Parvaneh. It is this conflict that builds the plot of the narrative

Also evident in the narrative is the element of eavesdropping. As a child, Massoumeh listened to adult's conversations and this affected her view of society. As the family deliberated on relocating to Tehran, her mother's concern was with the girls' purity and whether they would find good husbands there. She remembers her mother's caution:

But think of the girls. They won't be able to find a decent husband there, no one knows us in Tehran. Our friends and family are all here. Massoumeh has her year six certificate and even studied an extra year. It's time for her to get married. And

Faati has to start school this year. God knows how she'll turn out in Tehran.

Everyone says a girl who grows up in Tehran isn't all that good. (2)

By eavesdropping on the adult conversation, Massoumeh reveals the plight of the girl child in her conservative traditional society. Also, her mother's fear of losing kinship and family ties is shown. Massoumeh's mother is aware of city life where family relations are disregarded and everyone is busy chasing their own needs. This she says contrasts with life in Qum where there is a strong bond between family members; a distinct characteristic of life in most countries in the Global South. As I had argued before, women are the bearers of family honor hence are expected to maintain their chastity, both of their body and faith. This justifies the narrator's family's concern about their relocation to Westernized Tehran.

The use of a child narrator and first-person point of view characterizes Parinoush Saniee's literary works. In *I Hid my Voice*, Shahaab, though now an adult, recalls how he was alienated and discriminated against because of his dumbness at the age of four. His voice is complemented by that of his mother in an alternate narration explaining and furnishing the reader with more information that is unfathomable to Shahaab (the protagonist) at that tender age.

The first-person point of view enables the reader to traverse the narrator's mind to know more about their feelings towards life experiences. Massoumeh tells us her deep and innocent love for Saiid Khan. She explains how Saiid became her entire world thus:

I was in another world. I couldn't feel my physical presence. I was all spirit, flying in the air. I could even see myself lying there in bed with my eyes open, a big smile on my lips, pressing the letter to my chest. For the very first time, I regretted having

often wished that I had died instead of Zari. How pleasant life was. I wanted to embrace the entire universe and kiss it. (31)

Here, Saniee brings to the limelight the realities of teenage life that a family has to deal with. In my view, she questions the notion of cultural purity in postcolonial nations. Massoumeh's continuous interaction with Parvaneh Ahmadi and her going to school, gives her a chance to interact with the colonizer's culture, thus her ultimate existence in the hybrid space. Massoumeh herself questions the culture that in her view favours boys more than girls. In her confinement zone, she ponders her fate after being found guilty of dishonoring her family. Engaged in an internal monologue, she says:

By then I knew that the only way I could ever leave that house was as someone's wife. In fact, this was the single solution to the dilemma that everyone had voted on and ratified. I hated every corner of that house, but I didn't want to betray my dear Saiid by throwing myself from one prison into another. I wanted to wait for him until the end of my life, even if they were to drag me to the gallows. (61)

Again here, the readers get to understand Massoumeh's despair at being denied her sense of self. Her family members are careful in upholding their honor and reputation hence terminates her education so as to get married and spare them the shame. The use of first-person point of view thus propels the author's concern of women being the bearers of their family's collective honor and carriers of the cultural identity.

In a stream of consciousness, Saniee shows the train of thoughts going through Massoumeh's mind after being married forcefully to a man she feels nothing towards but fear. She says,

God, what sort of tradition was this? One day they wanted to kill me because I had exchanged a few words with a man I had known for two years, knew a lot about, loved and was ready to go to the ends of the earth with, and the next day they wanted me to climb into bed with a stranger whom I knew nothing about and for whom I felt nothing but fear. (84)

Through the above monologue, Massoumeh shows her perspective about her culture. By questioning the tradition that denies her the power to make her own choices, she displays growth from experience. Her marriage is hastily arranged so that her family could save themselves from shame brought by her interaction with other men. From her own point of view, the reader understands the injustice done unto her. Ironically, it is in her strange husband's house that she finds peace and a sense of self that make her thrive.

From her own point of view, Massoumeh brings to the fore some of the roles that contemporary Iranian women juggle including but not limited to child care responsibility, education, work and the burden of single motherhood. Narrating these from her personal experiences, the reader is moved with empathy and sympathy towards her and all mothers who go through the same. As a role model also, she teaches valuable lessons on how to juggle all these duties to contemporary women not only in Iran but globally. The way she embraces motherhood and takes responsibility for her children's welfare is worth emulating. She asserts, "I was neither a child nor incapable. I was a woman responsible for two children and I didn't want to raise them on the charity of others" (221) thus prides in her womanhood.

### 4.3 The Narrative Order

Pertaining to the narrative order, Gerard Genette observes that it entails the arrangement of narratives and the sequencing of events in a systematic way accounting for any deviation or distortion. Proponents of narratology argue that narratives conform to two basic orders which are, chronological and anachrony. Thus, a narrator can present a story chronologically or recount it anachronically. The chronological order, according to Gerard, follows the natural linear order where one event leads to the next while anachrony refers to the distortion or discordance between the events as narrated in the story and the actual order of events as they occurred which leads to a more complex and gripping plot. Whereas the chronological order triggers the “and then” question, anachrony on the other hand raises the reader’s curiosity on the past events that led to the present.

In his book, *Aspects of the Novel* (1964), Forster Edward provides a basic prototype of a chronological narrative order thus: “The king died, and as result of grief, the queen died too” (61). In this model, Forster demonstrates the linear or one-dimensional structure of a narrative. In this case, the queen died because she lost the king. In other words, the king died, then due to grief, the queen died as well. This shows the chronological order in which one event leads to the next. This king’s demise brought grief that ended in the queen’s death. Therefore, in most cases, here the attention of the reader is riveted on the future and not the past.

On the contrary, anachrony is a temporal distortion of the time pattern of the narrative. Jahn Manfred in *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narratives* gives two types of anachronies: analepsis also called flashback and prolepsis or flash forward. In analepsis, he says, the narrator recounts an event that had taken place earlier than the present point in the main story whereas in prolepsis the audience anticipates more at the end of the narrative. According to Gerard, “anachrony also takes place when a character reminisces through a story or narrates the story and

the events depicted in the story take the narratee to the past” (48). In *The Book of Fate*, Massoumeh reminisces about her past life in Tehran.

Unlike the chronological order in which events follow a sequence, anachrony allows the narratee to dig deep and unearth some of the information which otherwise would remain concealed. The narrative in *The Book of Fate* employs flashbacks to recount some events that had happened in the past and are important in understanding the current situation. The narrator revisits her past childhood life in order to illuminate the narrative. Gerard maintains that studying the temporal order of a narrative entails comparing the order in which events are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order in which they follow each other. (35) In *The Book of Fate*, the coming of age story of a young girl is narrated in chronological order from childhood to adulthood. Massoumeh’s narrative pushes the reader to ask the question: and then? in relation to the protagonist who is the narrator herself. The story chronologically follows the personal life experience of Massoumeh, a young timid girl passionate about her education in Qum village and then in Tehran where she becomes a mother of three and a scholar of the Persian language. It is her individual life story that tells the stories of other women in the Global South. Yet her life story is incomplete without flashbacks, thus Saniee employs them to reveal more information about their experiences in specific times.

Of significance to this study is how the events in *The Book of Fate* have been recounted using analepsis thus showing a temporal distortion between the time pattern of the fibula and the time pattern of the story. The narrator not only adheres to the one-dimensional narrative order focusing on what next but also revisits the past occasionally in order to provide more information and the context of the occurrences. For instance, in retrospect, Massoumeh recounts the events that led to her sister Zari’s death and the guilt her father felt that made him love her despite her being

female. In the same way, the narrator fashions us with information about uncle Hamid and later recounts his strained relationship with Grandmother back in Qum.

A focus on the narrative order demonstrates how Saniee has crafted a narrative that goes back to the pre-independence period, yet still relevant today in the way it depicts the lives of women not only in Iran but also in the other countries in the Global South. I have in the previous chapters illustrated various scholars' arguments about the events that prompted the establishment of the theocratic government in Iran (Stephen, 2008). Through analepsis, Saniee artistically depicts how this important historical moment shaped Iranian women's lives through the reinforcement of the veil as a way of asserting Muslim identity and by extension the nation's. Born and brought up in a religious family, Massoumeh recalls how hard it was for her family to agree to move from Qum to Tehran. She says,

When Grandmother died, her children sold the family house where we lived and gave everyone their share. Uncle Abbas told Father, "Brother, this is no longer the place to live. Pack up and come to Tehran. We'll put our shares together and we'll buy a shop. I will rent a house for you nearby and we'll work together. Come; start building a life for yourself. The only place you can make money is Tehran." (2)

As espoused above, this directive by Uncle Abbas raises the concern of limited resources in Qum. The family of Mr. Sadeghi is struggling to make ends meet but careful about compromising their religious values. Mahmoud argues that in Tehran, one's faith is compromised and his mother's major concern was what would become of her two daughters in the city, "God knows how she'll turn out in Tehran. Everyone says a girl who grows up in Tehran isn't all that good" (2). The main issue here is deeply rooted in the Shah's attempt to Westernize Iran and the opposition this met. As I had discussed before, women being the bearers of the nation's identity, their lives were put



under check to ensure no conformity to the Western values. Mr. Sadeghi's family believed that it is easier to keep their Islamic identity in Qum than in the city of Tehran. By narrating this event, the narrator sheds more light on the context and aids the reader in understanding what later happens to her when she falls in love with Saiid in Tehran and the family quickly organizes her marriage to a stranger.

Massoumeh goes back to the time when her grandmother was still alive. She recounts her strained relationship with Uncle Hamid who goes to the extent of marrying a foreigner. As a young girl then, she observed how Grandmother and Granny Aziz were taken back after being informed of Hamid's marriage to an Armenian. Grandmother's comment that a foreign wife is "ignorant and clueless about purity and impurity in our faith" (10) demonstrates their determination to uphold their cultural identity without any contamination. My presupposition is that the old generation experienced colonial oppression and exploitation hence their rejection of all that appertains to the West. Later in the novel, Massoumeh is portrayed as an intellectual woman existing within the space of two cultures. Although she embraces some Western norms, she does not abandon her Iranian identity and culture.

Lucie Guillemette and Cynthia Lévesque in their work *Narratology*, aver that analepses often take on an explanatory role, developing a character's psychology by narrating events from her past. In light of these scholar's argument, Massoumeh is made aware of the place of the girl child in Qum. She flashes back to the period when Zari (her elder sister) died at the age of eight because her grandmother believed that girls don't die, hence there was no need of calling a doctor when she fell ill. "Nothing is going to happen to her. I'm waiting for the decoction to brew. If I give it to her now, she'll be well by the time you come back. Go, don't just stand there ... go, my dear. Rest assured, the girl won't die." (51). Zari ended up dying and this made Massoumeh

understand the gender inequality in her society. Massoumeh's quest for independence in her future life is motivated by Zari's traumatic death. As Guillemette and Levesque argue, the analepsis employed by Saniee in recounting Zari's demise serves an explanatory role on why Massoumeh negotiates space for her sister Faati during her marriage.

By using analepsis, Parinoush Saniee fills the existing gaps in the narrative, thus fashioning the narratee with the full story of the characters and therefore revealing the real picture of women's experiences within their right contexts. The narrative order enables the narratee to experience and understand past events through the stories that move between the past and the present. It is evident in *The Book of Fate* that past history continues to curve the present. Memories also allow characters to recall their past so that the present can make more sense. By invoking the past Saniee exposes the realities of the issues the Third World woman grapple with, including gender inequality and further demonstrates their existence in the hybrid space.

#### **4.4 The Setting of *The Book of Fate***

The setting of a narrative explains the time and the place where the narrative is situated. Though often overlooked, the significance of a narrative setting cannot be gainsaid. Truby John in *Anatomy of a Story: Twenty-Two Steps of Becoming a Master Storyteller* (2007) refers to the setting as the "story world" or the social milieu that includes the social context beyond the immediate surrounding of the story. As a narrative strategy, the setting aids in creating the mood and giving context to the actions of the characters. Most importantly, a narrative setting provides the answers to the questions of "where?" (the physical environment where the events take place), "when?" (time) and "under what circumstances?" the events of the story being told. My interest is in the way Saniee addresses the issues of the Third World women by strategically setting the novel in a

Third World nation – Iran. In this regard, I examine the geographical, historical, political, economic and linguistic setting to establish a backdrop against which to analyze and understand the contemporary Iranian woman.

#### **4.4.1 Geographical Setting**

Geographically, The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is situated at the intersection of Central and South Asia and the Arab States of the Middle East, bordering the Caspian Sea to the North, Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the South. Her geographical location contributed significantly to European exploration and their ultimate domination of the country. Driven by colonial and imperial intentions, the Russian and British powers traversed and divided Iran into two spheres – North and South, each claiming authority over them in order to benefit from its natural resources. As scholars have argued, the term “Eastern” or “Oriental” was a colonial construct that depicted the people as weak and uncivilized. In relation to Europe, according to the Western World’s dichotomy, the Islamic Republic of Iran is among the countries existing in the Oriental space. Although fictitious, Saniee provides a believable setting for her characters in The Islamic Republic of Iran.

The fragmented relationship between Iran and the West is evident in most scholarly research. Edward Said in *Orientalism* states that the West had dominated the East for more than 2,000 years, since the composition of *The Persians* (present-day-Iran) by Aeschylus. He posits that the Occident – Orient binary focused mainly on the Western notions of the East (non – Western countries) which were generally false. Western writers, however, propagated these stereotypical perceptions of the Eastern World, depicting their irrational, feminine (weak) behavior while representing the West as everything else not Oriental.

Other than setting the novel in an imaginary utopian world, Saniee locates her work in The Islamic Republic of Iran. The events oscillate from Qum village to Tehran City and even overseas. In a flashback, Massoumeh narrates how they ended up moving from Qum to Tehran, the capital city of Iran. After her grandmother's demise, Uncle Abbas, who had stayed in Tehran for approximately ten years, challenged his brother Mr. Sadeghi to relocate to Tehran where he could make more money. Saniee provides a list of places explaining their location and significance. For instance, she writes that Qum is "a city in the south-west of Tehran and the center for Shi'a Islam scholarship. Considered holy as the site of the Fatima al - Massoumeh Shrine " (xi). This explains the conservative nature of the inhabitants who are careful that their culture is not corrupted by the West. In Qum, Western norms are shunned. Massoumeh's mother opposes Mahboubeh's idea of going to the West despite the fact that her husband could afford it. She argues, "why would she want to go? Over there everything is impure. How would she say her prayers?" (183). In other words, her faith is likely to be corrupted in the West. Girls there are expected to adorn themselves in a chador (a full-body length shawl held closely at the neck by hand or pin worn mainly by Iranians) while in the public spaces as a show of their Muslim identity. Decency and purity are paramount, disregard of the same is tantamount to punishment.

The movement to Tehran is significant in Saniee's narrative because of the remarkable growth that the protagonist experiences. It is in Tehran that she meets her friend and confidant Parvaneh Ahmadi who exposes her to the Western lifestyle. In her school in Tehran, the author portrays her as an intelligent girl hence her visibility among her brothers. In addition, it is in Tehran that the unbelievable happen. Massoumeh falls in love with Saiid. When the truth is revealed through Saiid's letters, she is married in haste to Hamid. Thus Tehran city tries to Westernize Massoumeh in a way, taking away her innocence. However, in my opinion, the author is trying to

show how patriarchal beliefs have found their way in religion. Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter* holds the same view. She argues that religion in its entity is not oppressive, rather the patriarchal notions have corrupted the minds of many religious leaders. Like Mariama's depiction of Ramatuolaye, Saniee portrays Massoumeh as a courageous, religious and audacious woman despite the challenges of patriarchy in Tehran.

It is also in Tehran that Massoumeh attains her intellectual empowerment yet still retains her religious identity. She attained her University degree in Persian Literature in Tehran University because of her marriage to Hamid. She proceeded to work for the government agency in Tehran at a time when most women were relegated to the private spheres of the home. Her mother is shocked when she tells her about her appointment to work in the public domain. In disbelief, she says, "you mean in an office? Like men...?" (338). Massoumeh tells her that in contemporary society, there is no more difference between men and women. By subverting the gender binary, Saniee demonstrates that the contemporary Iranian woman is empowered and exists in the hybrid space.

Another significant geographical setting in the narrative is Germany. At the beginning of the Iran – Iraq war that lasted about eight years, when young men were being conscripted to the military in order to fight for the country, Massoumeh feared losing her son Siamak the same way she lost her husband. Resultantly, she organizes for him to secretly leave the country to Germany. With his education terminated in Iran because of his communist father, Siamak had no hopes of a better life. Massoumeh's friend Parvaneh came in handy to help in hosting Siamak in Germany where she had moved after the Shah had been ousted from power. In Germany, Siamak manages to complete his University education, earns a degree in Engineering and starts a family. When she went visiting her son, Massoumeh learns of Siamak's relationship with Lili and their desire to get

engaged and stay together before getting married. Massoumeh cautions them against abandoning their Iranian culture and adopting a foreign culture even though they are in a foreign country. Such a thing as “long engagement” is unheard of in the Iranian culture. It is viewed as immodest, impure and indecent hence against their religious values. Thus Germany represents the West where the pro – Westerners flew to and a contrast to Iran in terms of values.

In brief, by situating *The Book of Fate* in the Islamic Republic of Iran, an Oriental nation, Saniee deconstructs the Western feminism notions about the Third World Muslim woman being docile and in need of Western civilization. Her novel gives a voice and urgency to the marginalized “other” insisting on a contextual analysis of these women’s situations other than mere generalizations about their oppressed state.

#### **4.4.2 Historical Setting**

The historical setting appertains to when the events occurred and the impact (s) they had on characters who lived within that period. Parinoush Saniee’s *The Book of Fate* is set during the turbulent years before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution. The narrative captures the period between the 1930s to 1980 after the establishment of the theocratic government. The narrator, Massoumeh, aged fifty – three narrates her childhood life in retrospect. The author weaves a thread that ties Massoumeh’s life with the history of her country, showing how pivotal history is in the construction of individual and collective identities. The historical backdrop thus illuminates the novel by providing the right context to understand and interpret the experiences of women in Iran and it also helps in appreciating the narrative.

As Iranian historian scholars have argued, the Iranian revolution was triggered by a number of factors. The major one being resistance against Western imperialism. Stephen Kinzer in *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* asserts that with the support of the United States, the Shah of Iran perpetuated the monarchical kind of government that made him rule for a period of over 26 years. Under his regime, the colonial administration gained authority and power over Iran in controlling her resources as well as the culture. The revolution hence, aimed at replacing the pro-Western authoritarian monarchy with an anti-Western theocratic form of government ruled by the Islamic Jurists. This regime revived Shiism as opposed to Sunni in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Massoumeh's life is narrated against this historical backdrop when the nation was emerging from colonial domination and trying to re-establish her identity. Her parents' insistence on veiling is a sign of adherence and conformance with Islamic values and a rejection of the Western social norms. Saniee contrasts her life with that of Parvaneh Ahmadi. The latter's family were ardent supporters of the Shah thus displayed compliance with the West. Massoumeh is taken aback by Parvaneh's vast knowledge of the different types of cars from the West and her freedom to peruse through magazines with Western figures. She is generally carefree about Islamic principles. Massoumeh says:

Parvaneh Ahmadi was a happy and cheerful girl. She was good at volleyball and was on the school team, but she wasn't doing all that well in her classes. I was sure she wasn't a bad girl, but she didn't abide by many principles. I mean she couldn't tell good from bad and right from wrong and had no clue how to be mindful of her father's good name and honour. (6)

By contrasting the lives of these two women, Saniee brings to the fore the impacts of colonialism on Iranians. How it divided the natives into those who subscribed to the Western culture and the ones who opted to retain their culture. Parvaneh wishes her father would own a black Chevrolet car. Massoumeh has no idea of how such a car looks like. She is humiliated one day when she calls a Fiat a Chevrolet. Because of their anti-Western attitude, Massoumeh's family never owned a television.

Parvaneh's family had a radio and a television at home. I had seen a television at Uncle Abbas's house, but we had only a large radio. While Grandmother was alive and whenever my brother Mahmoud was at home, we never listened to music, because it was a sin, especially if the singer was a woman and the song was upbeat. Although Father and Mother were both very religious and knew listening to music was immoral, they weren't as strict as Mahmoud and liked listening to songs. (7)

As espoused above, the difference in the lifestyle led by the two girls is evident in the ideologies that each family subscribed to. According to Mahmoud, Parvaneh is sin personified. He cautions his sister to distance herself from her. He observed their liberalism and conformity to western norms, dressing in short mini-skirts and exposing their bodies. Such indecency is not a true picture of Islam. After Shah is ousted from power and theocracy established, the family of Parvaneh flees to Germany for their safety.

The revolution was supported by both the leftists and the Islamists. Mahmoud, an ardent supporter of Islam joined the forefront of the revolution against Westernization. When Massoumeh pays them a visit on the day of their father's commemoration, Ehteram Sadat – Mahmoud's wife reports that her husband has totally been transformed by the revolution. He is hardly at home for prayers. It is as if he has received all he desired for. He says, "According to the Ayatollah, I am in



the forefront of the revolution, which is no different than a jihad in the name of God, and I will merit God's greatest blessings." In fact, much of his obsession is now over the revolution (252). As the elegies continued, the Mullah (a Muslim learned in theology and sacred law) acknowledges the sufferings that the late Mr. Sadeghi's family have been through since they left Qum. He says:

This honourable family has for years fought for faith and country and they have suffered the wounds. In 1963, after the events of 5 June and the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini, they were forced to leave their home and they migrated from Qum because their lives were in danger. (253)

Mullah's speech in this event reveals the 1963 white revolution history in Iran staged by the Shah in opposition to the establishment of an Islamic government. This led to the arrest and exile of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1964. The conservatives in Qum at this time faced a lot of hardship, hence Mr. Sadeghi's relocation to Tehran in 1961. Massoumeh, however, is not pleased by the picture of Mahmoud as painted by the Mullah of being kind to the needy. She sees all as hypocrisy and selfishness since he abandons them upon Hamid's incarceration and even after his execution. She tells her son:

Look, Siamak, we have lived without your father for four years and we have never needed anyone, especially not your uncle Mahmoud. I have struggled so that you could grow up with integrity and not with people's pity and charity, so that no one will ever look at you as needy orphans. And so far, we have always stood on our own two feet. We may have suffered some hardship, but we kept our pride and honour and your father's pride and honour. (255)

According to Massoumeh, Mahmoud only comes to their aid as a way of showing off his piety. This she does not condone. Her pride as a contemporary mother does not allow her to be trodden down and her esteem lowered. She takes up her motherhood responsibility, providing for her children however hard the situations are. Thus her courage, audacity and motherliness are brought out from this historical backdrop.

The revolution greatly impacted the life of the female protagonist, Massoumeh. Upon her husband's incarceration under the Shah regime, Massoumeh shoulders the burden of single motherhood, raising three young children alone. With limited resources, she is compelled to find a means of getting some income. At work, she braves being leered at by men and the fact that there were many who were more qualified for the job than her. She is however offered the opportunity after mentioning that her husband is in prison. This shows the unity in fighting for the revolution. Afterward, she is appointed the leader of the revolution committee for showing the true revolutionary spirit. This unity again shows how much Iranians rejected Western ways. They patiently waited for their leader after the revolution. Some who had left the country found their way back to rejoice upon the establishment of the Islamic government.

In essence, the historical setting of *The Book of Fate* enables Saniee to paint the real picture of the Third World Iranian women. In tune with Mohanty's insistence on the historical and cultural specificity when dealing with women in the Global South, Saniee demonstrates the role of history in the lives of Iranian women. Other than the Western perception of them being monolithic subjects oppressed by their religion, through the character Massoumeh, Saniee shows their diversity and the significant strides they have made throughout history.

#### 4.4.3 Political Setting

Still delving into the time aspect, *The Book of Fate* is set at a time of differing ideologies. Two political factions dominated the country – the Islamic Revolution Party and the Shah Rastakhiz Party. Saniee intertwines her narrative with the politics of Iran to show how they impacted the lives of women in Iran. She positions these women at the centre of the conflicting ideologies during the Islamic revolution.

To begin with, Massoumeh and Parvaneh’s friendship and sisterhood is strained because of the different political beliefs. Massoumeh’s sadness and loneliness are escalated not only by the physical distance that separated Parvaneh and her but also by their different political convictions. She asserts: “The only sadness that weighed on my heart was my renewed separation from Parvaneh. This time it wasn’t the physical distance that separated us, it was the difference in our political beliefs that kept us apart” (278). Although she (Parvaneh) had been very supportive during the period of Hamid’s imprisonment, their relationship was severed after his release because Parvaneh’s family supported the Shah. She says:

Each time we saw each other, our discussions and arguments intensified our differences. Oftentimes, we unintentionally slighted each other and parted on the verge of getting into yet another fight. Gradually, we lost interest in seeing each other, to the degree that I didn’t know when they packed their belongings and again left the country. My avid support for the revolution was at odds with my sorrow over losing Parvaneh again, and couldn’t blot it out. (279)

From Massoumeh's postulation above, it is evident that their different political beliefs had an immense effect on her. Although Parvaneh comes to her aid later by hosting Siamak in Germany, Massoumeh suffers loneliness and desperation for lack of a friend to confide in.

On the other hand, Hamid's support of the Marxist ideology of communism also impacted the novel's protagonist. His belief in equality, fairness and democracy antagonized that of the Shah and the Islamic government. Under the Shah regime, he is imprisoned and released after the Shah is overthrown. However, after the establishment of the Islamic government, his struggles to establish a democratic one severed his relationship with Massoumeh and the other members of the family. The burden of single motherhood is brought by Hamid's absence at home as he champions his own ideologies. Overwhelmed by the burden of single motherhood, Massoumeh reminds him of the promise he had earlier made:

You said if the Shah's regime falls, if the revolution triumphs, and if the people get what they want, you will go back to a normal life and we will quietly and happily raise our children together. Think about them. They need you. Stop all this. I don't have the patience and the strength for it any more. Your main goal has been achieved and you have performed your duty towards your ideals and your country; leave the rest for those who are younger. (340)

As shown above, Massoumeh is aware of the dangers of Hamid's pursuit thus pleads with him to stop and help her in raising their young children. She had noticed the differing opinions and personal inclinations which had been concealed by the solidarity of a common enemy – the Shah. This culminated in a sharp disagreement between Hamid and Mahmoud where Hamid accuses Mahmoud of being dogmatic and Mahmoud calls him an infidel who deserves execution. It is after this disagreement that Hamid is executed at Arvin prison and his son Siamak jailed on the

allegations of being part of the *Mujahedin* group. Massoumeh and her children suffer the stigma on the basis of being the wife and offspring of a communist. She is purged from work, deregistered from the university and her children are also expelled from school. However, her life changes after Massoud returns from the army and they are all honored. Therefore, in my view, the political setting of *The Book of Fate* is effective in the plot development and in creating the mood of the story, making it enjoyable to the reader.

#### **4.4.4 Linguistic Setting**

Here, I am concerned with the aesthetics of the narrative *The Book of Fate* that renders it authentic. I examine the various aspects that make the novel have an Iranian feel. In this regard, I look at the names of the characters, places and things. My opinion is that by retaining the words in their original Persian language (Farsi) after it's translation, the text acquires authenticity.

First, the name of the protagonist, Massoumeh has an Arabic root "Ma'sum" meaning innocent. Nayera affirms that the name in Farsi means "sinless and innocent" (223) although this is ironic to her abusive misogynistic brothers. Massoumeh struggles to retain her innocence amidst differing ideologies. Despite her extensive reading, her faith is not compromised. At the end, when Saiid Khan reappears and asks for her hand in marriage, for the sake of her children and the purity of her faith, she does not give in. In other words, she upholds her religious belief, forsaking her own needs so as not to wrong anyone. She accepts Saiid as a friend and not as a husband. By using this name, Saniee gives the narrative authenticity.

Secondly, the use of native words such as chador, headscarf, manteaux and hijab carries the Islamic connotation. Scholars have researched and written a lot on the way these Islamic attires are oppressive to Muslim women, denying them their freedom of choice. On the other hand, others have also argued for their use as identity markers (Milani Farzaneh, 1992). The insistence for women to wear the chador was meant for moral integrity. For instance, Ahmed sometimes found himself looking at Mrs. Parvin lustfully whenever her chador fell off. Massoumeh's grandmother also insists that a girl must wear her chador as a religious and moral obligation. The wearing of a chador is characteristic of Iranian women's identity. Using these terms, Saniee situates *The Book of Fate* in an Islamic context and narrates their experiences from an insider point of view who is well versed with the culture of Iran and Islam.

To further show her knowledge of Iranian culture, words such as *Agha*, *Korsi* wedding *Sofreh* are retained in the text for aesthetic effect and authenticity. *Agha* is a respectful way of referring to a man as a gentleman. In the glossary of terms, the term *Korsi* is explained as the traditional table in the Iranian culture with a heater beneath and blankets thrown over it. The table is cheap and affordable to most anti-Western Iranians. It is the type of table that Massoumeh's family has as compared to expensive furniture at Parvaneh's house.

In brief, Parinoush Saniee's *The Book of Fate* derives its authenticity and aesthetics by the choice to retain some of the words in their original Farsi language. Although translated for a wider readership and to make the world know of the rich Iranian culture, the novel retains its roots in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## 4.5 Dialogue

Dialogue is another strategy that Saniee deploys to represent contemporary women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This strategy has also been used to break the monotony of the first-person narrative voice and to expose the reader to the perspectives of the other characters in the novel.

A conversation ensues between Hamid and Massoumeh after Hamid's departure on the night of their wedding for three consecutive days. It is in this talk that the author reveals Hamid's indifference towards their marriage. His indifference works for the good of Massoumeh on one hand, and on the other, it disadvantages her. His non – commitment allows Massoumeh more time and space to read and empower herself intellectually while on the other side, she suffers loneliness as Hamid is always out championing his communist ideals. The dialogue goes:

What are your goals? What direction do you want to take?' 'My goal was to continue my education. But now ... I don't know.' 'Don't tell me you want to spend the rest of your life scrubbing this apartment.' 'No!' 'Then what? If your goal is to get an education, do it. Why are you giving up?' 'Because they don't allow married people in secondary school,' I said. 'You mean to tell me you don't know there are other ways of getting an education?' 'Like what?' 'Go to night school and take the standardized tests. Not everyone has to go to an ordinary school. (105)

In the above dialogue, Massoumeh is challenged to continue with her education. She takes the challenge and proves to be one of the intellectuals in Persian literature. This enables her to navigate the tough economic times after the revolution. She is depicted as a role model of contemporary Iranian women, and by extension, other women in the Global South. In addition, the author subverts the notion that patriarchy is always perpetrated by men. In this conversation and

elsewhere in the novel, Hamid encourages Massoumeh to go for her postgraduate studies. He believed in her making great progress if she continued studying.

Another conversation between Massoumeh and Shahrzad reveals how gracious, kind and hospitable Massoumeh is towards her. Again, another characteristic of contemporary women in the Global South. She warmly receives her into her house and takes care of her as a sister.

I took a comb and returned to the living room. It was difficult combing her tangled hair. ‘A hundred times I wanted to go and cut it all off and be rid of it,’ she said. ‘But I never found the time.’ ‘What? Why would you want to cut off all this beautiful, lush hair? A bald woman is really ugly.’ ‘Woman!’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Yes, you are right. I had forgotten I am a woman.’ (194)

Shahrzad’s commitment to fighting for the oppressed masses made her forget that she is a woman who ought to take care of her body as she tells Massoumeh above. Although she possesses a high level of competence, political astuteness, courage, and self-reliance – qualities that Massoumeh keeps admiring, she struggles with housekeeping and family duties.

Massoumeh’s depiction as a wise mother is brought out in her conversation with Shahrzad just before she loses her life. The latter admits her envy towards Massoumeh for her ability to juggle so many responsibilities and achieve all of them. The conversation goes:

I am jealous of you. You are a fortunate woman.’ ‘Jealous of me?’ I said, surprised. ‘You are jealous of me?’ ‘Yes! I think it is the first time I have felt this way.’ ‘You must be joking. I am the one who should be jealous of you. I have always wished I was like you. You are an amazing woman: well educated, brave, a capable decision maker ... I always think Hamid wishes he had a wife like you. And then you say ...



Oh, no! You must be joking. I am the one who should be jealous, but I don't think I even deserve to be envious of you. I would be like the commoner who is jealous of the Queen of England.' 'Nonsense. I am a nobody. You are far better and more complete than me. You are a lady, a good and loving wife, a kind and wise mother, eager to read and learn, and willing to make sacrifices for your family.' (201)

In this dialogue, Massoumeh feels her unworthiness in the eyes of Shahrzard. The image of the Queen mother shows how highly Massoumeh regarded Shahrzard's achievement in life only to realize her need to fulfill her womanly desire. As I had discussed previously, Saniee here affirms every woman's wish of attaining womanhood through motherhood which in this case has only been achieved by Massoumeh. Shahrzad is saddened by the fact that she did not manage to bear children in order to attain the prestigious status of womanhood. Her maternal desire is evident in the way she extends a motherly love and care towards Massoud. On her departure, she advises Massoumeh to take good care of her children. For this reason, she offers to lose her life rather than betray this family. Therefore, this dialogue exposes the character trait of Massoumeh as a kind and wise mother.

Saniee's presentation of women as the bearers of the family's collective honour is brought out in the protagonist's conversation with Parvaneh. After the revolution, Parvaneh travels back to Iran and meets Massoumeh's beloved, Saiid. She advises her to accept Saiid's marriage proposal even though they are old. In her (Parvaneh) view, this would gratify her emotional needs as well as provide her company. However, Massoumeh, whose name symbolizes innocence, rejects the idea as against her culture. She does not do what other women in the other parts of the world do because of her uniqueness. They argue:

Please, Parvaneh, stop it!’ I cried. ‘Get married? At my age? What would my children say?’ ‘What would they want to say? You gave them your youth, you did everything for them. Now you have to think about yourself. You have the right to have someone in your life to grow old with. I think they would actually be happy for you.’ ‘You don’t understand,’ I said. ‘I am afraid they would be embarrassed in front of their spouses. I have to think about their honour and reputation, too.’ (430)

As shown in Massoumeh’s argument, even as a grown-up woman, she is still determined to keep the family honour at the expense of her peace, happiness and emotional needs. Again it shows the extent to which women sacrifice their needs for the sake of their children.

Towards the denouement of the novel, Saiid holds a dialogue with Massoumeh to request for her hand in marriage. Massoumeh, at the age of fifty-three, rejects his proposal for the sake of her children’s reputation and honour. This again shows how women sacrifice their own needs and desires for the sake of their children. She says:

Even in my thoughts, I didn’t know what answer I should give him. ‘I don’t know.’ ‘How could you not know? After thirty-something years you still cannot make a decision for yourself?’ ‘Saiid, my children ... what will I do about my children?’ ‘Children? What children? They have all grown up and gone off to live their own lives. They don’t need you anymore.’ ‘But they are very sensitive about me; I’m afraid this would upset them. Their mother, at this age—’ (429)

Massoumeh’s decision is a demonstration of the freedom that as a woman, she has gained over time in making her own choices. She opts to sacrifice her emotional attachment to Saiid for the sake of preserving her relationship with her children. Further, her choice is in accordance with

social customs and traditions, which view a widow's remarriage as a kind of taboo (Nayera, 229). This decision is an assertion of self-autonomy that the Third World woman has gained and proof that they are not naïve and powerless as propounded in the mainstream Western feminism discourse.

#### **4.6 Letters**

As a narrative strategy, Saniee employs letters for a more personalized touch of the narrative *The Book of Fate*. A letter adds realism to a story since it imitates real-life experiences and feelings. According to Nelson Angelica in her article *The Crafting of the Self in Private Letters and the Epistolary Novel* (2016), letters provides the writer with a blank space in which to express their thoughts and emotions to the absent other in a communicative effort to minimize separation thus creating an illusion of their presence. She further avers that the presumed privacy of a letter allows the writer to project personal and truthful sentiments and an illusion of intimacy hence its effectiveness in romantic fiction.

In Saniee's narrative *The Book of Fate*, Saiid Khan writes a letter to Massoumeh as a gesture of kindness to her and to show his concern about her health. In the salutation, he uses the phrase "Respectable young lady" (35) to show his high regard for her. As she reads it, she is awed by the respect, esteem, care and concern he extends towards her, who has been treated as a nobody by her misogynistic brothers. For the first time, Massoumeh feels her sense of worth.

The letter provides Saiid space to pour his love sentiments to Massoumeh which he has been brooding due to the prevailing circumstances. Due to its confidentiality and privacy as a

medium of communication, Saiid is certain that the letter will only be read by Massoumeh. He writes:

I have yet to allow myself to write your name on paper, although I shout it in my heart a thousand times a day. No name has ever been so becoming and befitting a face. The innocence in your eyes and on your face is so pleasing to the eye. I am addicted to seeing you every day. So much so that when I am deprived of this blessing, I find myself at a loss for what to do with my life. (35)

The use of the first-person pronoun “I” gives the letter a personal touch. The reader identifies with the inner feelings of Saiid towards Massoumeh which he has been unable to express verbally. The confidentiality of this form, therefore, engages the reader in a vicarious way.

Further, the poem he inserts in the letter shows his great penmanship. As a lover of literature, Massoumeh is moved with love towards Saiid’s creativity. He says:

My heart Is a mirror

Hazy with sorrow

Cleanse the dust off this mirror

With your smile. (35)

The images of the mirror and the heart adds to the aesthetics of the letter. By comparing his heart to the fragility of a mirror and the fact that it attracts dust easily, Saiid expresses his deep and innocent affection for Massoumeh and his delight in her smile. He continues to implore Massoumeh to write to him as well so as not to suffer unrequited love in solitude. For his

gentleness, civility, compassion, penmanship and erudition evident in the letter, Massoumeh admits her love and wishes to spend her entire life with him.

Although deployed to express innocent love, the letter becomes tangible evidence for Massoumeh's waywardness and indecency. Her brother's allegations of her flirting with men in the streets of Tehran bringing dishonor and shame to the family is proved by the letter. Ali reads it word by word to the hearing of everyone and instantly, she is denounced and put on "sale" to any potential suitor. This letter is effective in plot development as it marks the transformation that takes place in the protagonist's life. Massoumeh is hastily married off to a stranger and for some moments entertains suicidal thoughts before events take another dramatic twist. In my opinion, again, the letter shows some level of authenticity and reality of the lives of teenagers in contemporary society.

#### **4.7 Intertextuality**

The term intertextuality is accredited to Julia Kristeva who brought it into discourse in the late 1960s in her critique of Michael Bakhtin's notions of Dialogism and Carnival. Intertextuality acknowledges the existence of traces of other texts in a particular text. According to Kristeva in her work, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), any work of art is an intertext in the way it interacts with other texts. Simply put, intertextuality refers to a way of interpreting texts by borrowing words and concepts from others. In other words, it entails interdependence of texts that aids in deriving meaning from the one referred to.

In displaying the link between texts, authors employ quotations, allusion, references among others to communicate a message to the reader. A literary critic hence ought to pay attention to

the echoes in a text for its proper interpretation and understanding. Parinoush Saniee uses this strategy to communicate important issues of contemporary women in Iran.

To begin with, Massoumeh's reference to the works of Forough Farokhzad, specifically her poem *The Captive* bestows hope and courage in her as they share the same predicament. Forough was a renowned young Iranian poet who dominated the cultural spaces of Iran. The persona in this poem is a young girl married forcefully to a man she doesn't love hence ends up being a captive. Saniee quotes:

I want you, yet I know that never

can I embrace you to my heart's content.

you are that clear and bright sky.

I, in this corner of the cage, am a captive bird (94)

This intertextuality is effective as it reveals the plight of a girl child in Iran. The author refers to Forough's poem to show Massoumeh's predicament and give urgency to the girl child. Massoumeh finds the poem relevant to her situation as it gives her a flicker of hope because she is not the only one.

In addition, the concept of motherhood is also elucidated using Forough's poem *Which Summit, Which Peak?* Massoumeh refers to this poem when justifying to Hamid the reason Sharzard could not betray his family. She tells him that while in their house, Sharzard loved reading this poem as it reminded her of motherhood, a status that she desired to achieve but did not. She quotes:

Give me refuge you flickering lights,

you bright mistrusting homes  
on whose sunny rooftops laundered clothes  
sway in the arms of scented soot.  
Give me refuge you simple wholesome women  
whose soft fingertips trace  
the exhilarating movements of a fetus beneath your skin,  
and in your open collars. (271)

The persona in this poem is a wanderer, a homeless woman who sees other women with homes and children as fortunate and wholesome. Shahrzad's envy towards Massoumeh is made clear by her reference to this poem. As a mother of three, a working and educated woman, Shahrzad perceives this as the epitome of a woman's life. Although passionate about fighting for the rights of the oppressed, her maternal feelings could not be brushed off. Through this intertextuality, Saniee points to the importance of the concept of motherhood to contemporary women who have to pursue other goals in life as they exist in the hybrid space.

#### **4.8 Rhetorical Questions**

The form of *The Book of Fate* comes in instances where the protagonist poses questions to the narratee. This strategy is called rhetoric and it comes in the shades of interrogation and affirmation. Saniee uses both in representing the Iranian woman. For instance, upon her arrival at Hamid's house, Massoumeh, full of fury asks herself, "But what about my revenge? How could I make them suffer? How could I make them understand how ruthless they had been with me?" (88).

Having been married forcefully to a stranger without her consent, Massoumeh is pained by the injustice meted on her by her conservative family hence her vengeful wish. She is devastated by the fact that in her home, family honour and reputation is prioritized over one's wellbeing. By posing these questions, the narrator brings to the limelight the plight of the girl child in Iranian society although she is compelled to accept her fate just like other young Iranian girls at the time.

Secondly, Massoumeh affirms her role as a mother in the contemporary Iranian society. Even though she experiences various challenges and the burden of raising up her children as a single mother in a country under political turmoil, Massoumeh braves motherhood and takes pride in raising her children in honor. She asserts:

Every month, Hamid's father gave me some money for us to live on, but how long could that go on? I had to make a decision. I had to find a job. I was neither a child, nor incapable. I was a woman responsible for two children and I didn't want to raise them on the charity of others. Sitting still, whining and holding my hand out in front of this and that person was beneath me, beneath my children, and especially beneath Hamid. We had to live with honour and pride; we had to stand on our own two feet. But how? What work could I do? (221)

As shown above, Massoumeh's use of rhetorical questions affirms her desire to take care and provide for her children in the absence of Hamid. As a rational, intelligent and industrious mother, she does not succumb to charity from donors. Such expressions are specific to women especially when overwhelmed by emotions.

Towards the end of the narrative, Massoumeh poses a series of questions to her son Massoud as a way of demonstrating her growth and attainment of selfhood and womanhood. She



asserts her right to choose her own dress code during Massoud's engagement and not to be forced again to wear a chador. She asks him:

Look, my dear, did you forget that we are human? That we think for ourselves and have our own principles and beliefs, and we cannot constantly transform ourselves into people we are not? Do you know how many times I have had to change how I cover myself because of what men saw fit? I wore a chador in Qum, I wore a headscarf in Tehran, I married your father and he didn't want me to wear any hijab at all, then came the revolution and I had to wear a long manteau and a headscarf, and when you wanted to marry Miss Ladan you wanted me to be elegant and fashionable. (403)

For long, her life has been dictated by the changing fortunes of the country and she now feels time is ripe for her to think and decide for herself. Again this is typical characteristic of women's way of expressing themselves when they feel their opinions have always been suppressed and subdued.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

Guided by Gerard Genette's narratological framework in this chapter, I have examined some of the important narrative strategies employed in *The Book of Fate* to present Iranian women against the historical backdrop and represent them in the hybrid space. I have analyzed aspects such as the narrative voice and point of view, the narrative order, the setting (geographical, historical, political and linguistic), use of dialogue, letters/epistles, intertextuality, rhetorical questions and their effectiveness in narrating the experiences of women in The Islamic Republic of Iran.

In my analysis, I contend that through the use of the first-person point of view and analepses or flashbacks, the author is able to tell the stories of women in Iran from their own personal experiences giving the novel an insider's view of the contemporary woman in Iran. Since the narrative is written in the past, the narrator looks back into her life in retrospect, showing how the major historical events shaped and continue to shape their lives. Moreover, by situating the novel in the Middle East – Iran, an Oriental Islamic state, Saniee demystifies the situation of Muslim women hence a closer study of their experiences putting into consideration their diverse cultural and historical context is paramount for a better understanding of their lives other than making generalizations of their oppressed status.

I also note that the use of dialogue in a narrative is important not only in breaking the monotony of the first-person narrative voice but also in revealing the perspectives of other characters thus creating a conflict that drives the story forward. In addition, the deliberate choice to retain native words in the text adds some authenticity and aesthetics to the text and so does the use of letters. Intertextuality (References to other texts) in this novel corroborates *The Book of Fate*, shedding more light on the issues that the contemporary Iranian women grapple with.

Precisely, this chapter has demonstrated how Parinoush Saniee in *The Book of Fate* has employed the selected narrative strategies to give the “Third World” woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran a distinct voice and urgency from an insider perspective. By allowing Massoumeh to narrate her own personal experience from her own perspective, Saniee brings to the limelight and cements the concern of women being the bearers of their family's collective honor in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Massoumeh's adornment in veil justifies her Muslim identity, and shows her conformity with Islamic ideologies. Dialogue between Massoumeh and Shahrzad shows how the desire of every woman to attain womanhood by having her own children whom she can nurture.

Additionally, her conversation with Hamid displays the burden of single motherhood. The narrative order employed in the text aids in capturing some important historical events in the Pre and post-revolutionary Iran thus providing the context of the story and the rhetorical questions helps in bringing out expressions specific to women in Iran.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This research project has delved into the representation of the contemporary Iranian woman with particular focus to Parinoush Saniee's novel, *The Book of Fate*. In this regard, I have examined how she has been depicted against the historical backdrop of the Islamic Republic of Iran and represented in the hybrid space.

The study hypothesized, first, that Iranian women's experiences have been depicted against the historical backdrop of Iran in *The Book of Fate*. I have noted the centrality of history in understanding the situation of the "Third World" Muslim woman specifically in the Islamic Republic of Iran thus disavowing the notions about her being a monolithic subject and a perpetual victim as propounded in the mainstream academia.

From the historical perspective, I have suggested that Iranian women are the signifiers of the nation's cultural purity and in the contestation for cultural purity, Saniee positions the woman figure at the centre. Tracing their depiction from precolonial Persia, I have tried to demonstrate how powerful and autonomous Persian women were both in the private and public spaces. For example, royal women held significant positions within the King's court as shown by Price Massoumeh's article *Women in Persian History*. She argues that despite the fact that the King possessed ultimate power, women still operated within a clearly defined spectrum of norms and enjoyed some level of economic independence. In other "Third World" nations, the research also showed that women's roles in society complemented those of their male counterparts. In Western Africa for instance, Azodo Uzoamaka in *Issues in African Feminism* notes how Nigerian women

chiefs were stripped of their roles as they had become insignificant during and after colonialism. Further, the education system of the colonizer discriminated against the female gender, her work lost value hence her regimentation to the private spaces as the “ideal” woman according to the standards set for her by the colonizers.

History revealed that two superpowers – Russia and Great Britain took control of Iran from the early years and divided it into the Northern sphere and Southern sphere aiming at the economic benefit. This annexation was however justified on the grounds that the natives were uncivilized, primitive therefore unable to govern themselves thus their need to be educated in the Western school of ethos. This stereotype is depicted in the Orientalist feminism discourse who painted the “Third World” Muslim woman as passive, backward, traditional and a victim of their religious systems hence their need to be saved by their fortunate “sisters” in the “First World”. Such an argument, this study has shown, is devoid of historical and cultural specificity.

In my definition and understanding of the concept of the “Third World” I have suggested that the term connotes the countries that were once colonized by the Western powers. Terms such as “underdeveloped” and “developing” have been used by Orientalists to refer to these countries. However, such terms denote inferiority, implying their continuous dependence on the Occident nations perceived as “developed” hence my use of the term “Global South.”

In pre-revolutionary Iran, the clerics observed the violation of the key tenets of Islam by those in leadership and their mission of modernizing Iran by allowing the colonizers to take control of the country’s resources. In an attempt to restore the original religious culture of the natives, a number of sanctions were put in place. My interest was in examining the impact this had on the lives of women. In this regard, I discussed the woman figure as the signifier of the nation’s cultural

purity, bearers of the family's collective honor and how they continue to navigate life in the hybrid space.

Examining the various aspects of Iranian women's lives that have been impacted significantly by colonial history that led to the establishment of a theocratic government, I have argued that the woman figure has been used to contest cultural and national identity. Their conformance to religious values is a show of the nation's resistance and rejection of Western norms. Through her dressing and demeanor, a Muslim woman displays allegiance to Islam.

To begin with, I have argued that an Iranian woman clad in a veil is a symbol of piety and conformance to the ideologies of the theocratic government. In pre and post-revolutionary Iran, the wearing of the veil was enforced as a conspicuous marker of Islamic identity and a public show of resistance against Western ideologies and by extension the government that perpetuated the latter's norms. In order to ensure Massoumeh retains her Muslim identity in Tehran, her father insists that she covers herself in public spaces. Her brother Ali follows her as she goes to school to ensure she behaves well like a decent and modest Muslim girl. Further, I contend that by narrating her life side by side with Parvaneh, Saniee weaves her characters to reconstruct the history of Iran. Parvaneh and her family represents the pro – western group as they were not careful about the many principles; her mother could wear miniskirts. Massoumeh's brothers saw her as the very embodiment of sin. The narrative plot is developed by this conflict between Western and religious ideologies. Later the pro-Western group left the country for safety overseas.

I have also argued that the veil was also used to display modesty and morality within the society. This is among the top most ideal in the theocratic government. In *The Book of Fate*, Ahmed lusts for Mrs. Parvin whenever she works and her chador falls off. Massoumeh narrates that after this she would see him confessing since it is immoral to look at a woman lustfully. Again

Grandmother always chided Mahboubeh for her carelessness with her chador, letting it fall off exposing her body to male strangers. Grandmother believed that girls had to be taught how to adorn themselves so that they don't deviate from their cultural and religious identity.

It is also my opinion that women in Iran as shown in the text as the bearers of their family's collective honour. In other words, depending on whether they choose to uphold religious values or not, their actions would bring honour or dishonor to their families. This is shown when Mr. Sadeghi's family shared their concern about the girls upon relocating to Tehran. Massoumeh falling in love with Saiid Khan brings shame and dishonor to the family hence her hasty marriage to Hamid Soltani.

Further, I have also demonstrated the inability of attaining cultural purity after interaction with other foreign cultures. Therefore, the Muslim woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran exists in the hybrid space. According to Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* the hybrid space provides a new space for the construction of new identities. Identities formed as a result of the mixing of cultures. In the text, women continue to negotiate for this space through education that has given them a voice. For instance, Soraya is determined to get her university degree after graduation. Her mother is supportive because she is aware of the changing times. Massoumeh also advises her daughter Shirin that she has to finish higher education before thinking of marriage. With intellectual empowerment, Massoumeh is convinced that a woman can navigate life in Tehran despite poor economic times.

This study also hypothesized that contemporary Iranian women have been represented in *The Book of Fate*. Here I delved into their portrayal in the third space and the various interconnected factors that affect their lives. The argument I advance is that Parinoush Saniee

represents Iranian women's experiences and challenges from an insider point of view putting into consideration the historical, cultural and economic context of the nation.

Concerning their representation in the cultural context, I contend that women writers in the Global South have in recent years insisted on representing the contemporary woman not merely as passive and docile beings but as vital participants interacting with the laid societal structures in an attempt to assert some degree of autonomy.

In a culturally specific way, I argue that the female protagonist in *The Book of Fate* has been represented as a conscious visible self. In a society where men have an upper hand in education and in other spheres of life, Massoumeh's brilliance brings her prominence both at her home and in school. She is brought to the limelight at a time when culturally she is supposed to be married off. As proof of her visibility in the public spaces, she is praised for raising her children single-handedly while her husband is in prison. She is later nominated as the representative of the revolutionary committee at her workplace. It is my observation that her representation as a role model to the other contemporary Iranian women shows her consciousness as a reflection of the visible woman in a culture where men are advantaged in the public spheres. Saniee thus represents women in the Global South as rational and autonomous.

I argue that the contemporary Iranian woman has been portrayed as intelligent and astute. In other words, they are intellectually empowered. This is demonstrated through the novel's protagonist, Massoumeh. In her conversation with Hamid in prison, Massoumeh admits that Hamid's books are responsible for her increased knowledge in various subjects, both social and political. She says, "luckily, your books, the university and my job made it possible" (272). She grabbed every available opportunity to study and widen her worldview in her matrimonial home.



Other than being the contemporary intellectual women in Iran, they have been represented as responsible and wise mothers. Massoumeh takes her motherhood duty with pride. She does not allow her children to survive on charity and well-wishers. Despite the tough economic times especially to the anti- Westerners, she braves humiliation at work so as to provide for Siamak, Massoud and Shirin. Culturally, I argue that motherhood is the epitome of womanhood and every woman looks forward to attaining it. Shahrzard's inability to achieve this made her envy Massoumeh but she advises her to continue taking care of her children as a mother. My observation is that the contemporary woman juggles a lot of responsibilities. Like Massoumeh, they juggle motherhood with their careers and education, hence the complexities of their lives. Thus a singular definition does not suffice their definition and understanding.

I further explored the representation of contemporary Iranian women as candidates of single motherhood in the *Book of Fate*. Akin to women in other Global South nations whose spouses were imprisoned or killed in the war, the burden of single motherhood is a real challenge especially in the times when women are relegated to private spaces. Upon the demise of the spouse, the woman is compelled to shoulder the burden of bringing up her children alone despite hard economic times. Massoumeh, having been purged from work, had to start sewing so as to provide her children with basic needs. I have observed that the burden and stigma of single motherhood is seldom narrated but it is a reality in most societies. These women are mostly silenced and their stories of struggle rarely reach the public domain especially for the ones whose husbands were political prisoners.

In regards to the narrative form and artistic crafting, this study hypothesized that the various narrative strategies employed in *The Book of Fate* are effective in narrating Iranian woman's experiences. Saniee uses some aspects of narratology such as the narrative voice and point of view,

the narrative order, the setting, letters, dialogue, intertextuality and rhetorical questions to narrate these women's experiences in pre and post-revolutionary Iran.

First, the narrative is told from the first-person point of view. Massoumeh as the narrating voice looks back into her life as a young teenage girl growing up in Qum before moving to Tehran. By adopting a child's voice from the beginning of the narrative, I contend that Saniee presents an honest and truthful account of these women's experiences. The voice of a child in a way captures historical realities and the way revolution impacted on their lives. All these are depicted through Massoumeh's point of view and by her eavesdropping in adult conversation. For instance, she learns that Qum is unsafe for her conservative family during the white revolution after hearing Uncle Abbas advise her father to move to Tehran where he could earn a living.

In my analysis of the narrative order, I argued that by using analepses, Saniee has managed to fill the gaps in the narrative and furnish the reader with important information of the events that had happened before that aids in a better understanding of the current situation. Massoumeh in a flashback recalls Zari's death at the age of eight hence the reason for her father's love and support towards her education since he felt that Zari's death was a result of his ungratefulness when she was born. She also remembers her Grandmother's strained relationship with Uncle Hamid after they learned of his marriage to a foreigner (Armenian). The old generation harbored bitterness of foreign domination and exploitation hence their resistance.

Other than the narrative order, narrative voice and point of view, I observed that the historical, geographical, political and linguistic settings adopted in the novel are effective in rendering the text authentic and aesthetically appealing to any reader. Saniee has weaved the narrative with the threads of colonial history and demonstrated how they impacted the lives of women in Iran. Throughout the narrative, Massoumeh's life is shaped by the country's history.

She married at an early age because her family wanted to uphold their religious values by not condoning any sign of immodest behavior. The different political factions during and after the Islamic revolution made her life take a different shape. She is widowed and labeled the wife of a communist and experiences the stigma that comes with single motherhood.

I further contend that by situating the text in Iran – a “Third World” and Oriental nation, Saniee brings out the tension between the Occident (West) and the Orient (East) thereby deconstructing the notions about the former's alleged superiority and the latter's inferiority. From an insider point of view, *The Book of Fate* narrates the real-life experiences of Muslim women in Iran and their challenges thus subverting their monolithic representations in the mainstream feminism discourse. Further, the artistic use of letters gives the text some personal feel and authenticity. The dialogue develops the plot, breaks the monotony of the first-person narrative voice and gives the perspectives of other characters in the story. It is through the dialogue between Hamid and Mahsoud that the reader learns of the two antagonistic forces tearing the nation apart. Last but not least is the use of intertextuality that collaborates the narrative. In order to understand the real-life experience of the Iranian woman so as to give her a voice and urgency, I recommend further study of life narratives by Iranians, reading them in light with historical events to illumine the details that otherwise would remain concealed in most of the available mainstream feminism discourses.



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