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Editorial Office address: LCSS, 4th floor, Cornhill House, 59-60 Cornhill, London, EC3V 3PD, UK
Tel.: 0044 (0) 20 7936 3118
Website: http://www.rossjournal.co.uk
ISSN No. 205–448X (Online)

Correspondence concerning editorial content and potential submissions should be addressed to the editor:
latif.tas@rossjournal.co.uk

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Gender and Migration

London Centre for Social Studies
Published in London, United Kingdom
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Bilingualism and Gender in the Literature of Iranian Women in the Diaspora

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Abstract
Some years before and after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, a huge number of Iranians migrated to western countries due to social and political problems. There is a significant body of literary and autobiographical works by Iranian female writers in the Diaspora during the last 50 years. The early works are mostly social and political, as writing about the private life of female subjects has been taboo for Iranian women, even in exile. These women’s literary writing has been analysed in western academia to get a closer view of the political and social conditions in Iran before and after the Islamic revolution. However, in the last two decades, more literary works have been concerned with the private aspect of the lives of the characters in the Diaspora and the (trans)formation of their gendered identity. As reflected in some of these works, bilingualism leads to identity crisis and social conflict for the female characters and narrators. As there is a huge population of Iranians living in the English-speaking countries, there is a great number of diasporic memoirs and literary works of Iranian women in English, embodying identity and gender issues. However, there have been only a few critical works on the subject of language and gender in the recent literary and autobiographical works of Iranian female writers in the Diaspora. This article examines the relationship between bilingualism and female characters’ identity formation in the late literary productions of Iranian women in the Diaspora, using post-colonial theories of bilingualism and gender. In this research, the poems published in the anthology Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora, edited by Persis M. Karim (2006), and the full text of four memoirs, extracts from which are included in this work, are chosen for the case study due their focus on bilingualism and gender from different aspects.

Keywords
diaspora literature, bilingualism, hybrid language, gender generations, instrumental investment

Introduction
In the last 50 years, a large population of Iranians has left for western countries in search of better social and political conditions. The most

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1 Special thanks are due to Prof. Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek, director of the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of Göttingen. His expertise and advice has been extremely valuable, and without him this project would not have been possible. Besides, my special thanks go to my friends and family, all of whom have given me encouragement, love and support throughout.
studied literary works of the Iranian Diaspora are social and political ones by authors who migrated as adults a few years before or after the Islamic revolution. However, these works, and the studies carried out on them, have not provided us with adequate information and analysis of the relationship between the language and the gendered identity of the characters and narrators. The recent literary works and memoirs of Iranian female writers in the Diaspora reflect the (trans)formation of gendered identity and the linguistic and cultural hybridity of the diasporic characters. This hybridity and these problems of identity become more significant in the case of women, as they are doubly colonialised, according to Spivak’s term, due to discrimination as colonial subjects in the Diaspora and gender subordination within patriarchy (Spivak 1994: 103).

In this research, the poems published in the anthology Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora, edited by Persis M. Karim (2006) and the full text of four memoirs entitled Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran (Moaveni 2006), Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America (Asayesh 2002), To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America (Bahrampour 1999), and Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America (Dumas 2004), are analysed using post-colonial and postmodern theories of bilingualism and gender. In the selected poems and memoirs the narrators tell us about the significance of the mother tongue in preserving identity and the role language acquisition plays in integration. Hybridity in terms of language, as a consequence of the in-between identity of the female characters, is another theme of these works. All of the selected memoirs refer to a journey between Iran and the United States, and the experience of oscillation between two cultures and languages.

Bilingualism affects the identity formation of the female characters, through their investment in the second language, their social life and their generation. The female characters and the narrators belonging to the first generation of immigrants are expected to stick to the mother tongue and national values and transmit them to the next generation. Anthias and Yuval-Davis, (1993: 113) state that:

Women and their sexualities emerge as significant markers and perpetuators of these [insider/outsider] boundaries, and by extension as sources and sites for transgressing the said boundaries. Moreover, they point to at least three elements that bring out central aspects in the lineaments between the constructions of nations, ethnicities and boundary formation in and through the control of the feminine body. Namely: i) as biological producers of the ‘collective’ [race/nation/ethnic group]; ii) as boundary markers and therefore reproducers of these boundaries; iii) as transmitters of culture and the ideological reproduction of collective symbolisms.
The female characters and narrators of the first generation are considered the protectors of the value system of the community of Iranians in the Diaspora. However, this causes a lack of interest in language acquisition for these characters. Lack of previous adequate education, which facilitates language acquisition, and insufficient contact with the new society and language, are other obstacles that some of the first-generation female characters in these works face. However, the female characters of the second generation eagerly learn English in order to integrate into the new society.

The fight to retain one’s own identity via language is an important theme in the works in question. The use of English is significant in some of these works as in parts the writers and female characters use Persian grammar in English, or even include Persian words written in the Roman alphabet, which are completely meaningless to an anglophone reader. This puts the language of the text somewhere between Persian and English, between the language of the characters and that of the host-language readers.

However, for them, English is not just associated with marginality and otherness. It is the language of modern and free countries and it therefore gives the subjects a sense of security when they express their inner conflicts in this language.

Bilingualism and Gendered Identity

One of the first requirements of a life in the Diaspora for these female characters is to learn the language of the host country so as to communicate and belong. The process of learning and using this second language affects and is affected by the gendered identities of the characters, their community and the generations to which they belong. Language seems more arbitrary to them in comparison to the characters who do not experience the Diaspora and bilingualism. As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000: 169-170) put it:

The ultimate attainment in second language learning relies on one’s agency […]. While the first language and subjectivities are an indisputable given, the new ones are arrived at by choice... [through] a long, painful, inexhaustive, and, for some, never-ending process of self-translation.

The expectations of the community to which the subject belongs affect her identity and her investments in cultural capital. The reactions of the characters to the expectations of the community in terms of language use play a great role in second language use, as Menard-Warwick and Ehrlich have found in their research, admitting the importance of the gendered identity of female characters in language acquisition: “[L]anguage learning is not so much mediated by ‘the way that gender identities and gender
relations are constructed in (a) community”” (Ehrlich 1997: 430, in Menard-Warwick 2009: 72), “but rather by the way that individuals respond to the gendered expectations that are placed on them by their families and communities” (Menard-Warwick 2009: 72).

The community of Iranian exiles and their families expect the female characters to preserve the mother tongue and the national values instead of passing the boundaries of the community by learning the language, fearing the destruction of the patriarchal structure of traditional families and the community. But to belong to the new society, the subjects need to learn the second language and communicate actively with the new world. Otherwise they will undergo marginalisation and inferiorisation. Responses to the gendered expectations, however, are also constructed and instructed by the power relations in the society and the generation to which the subject belongs. Below I will try to clarify the significance of generation and community in the gendered identity and language learning of female characters in the works mentioned.

Generations

The motivation of the female characters to learn the new language is related to their investment in a community. As Norton and McKinney (2011: 75) puts it:

> The construct of investment, first introduced by Norton [...], signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it [...]. Norton argued that, if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital.

The investment in the community is different for the first and second generations. The first generation invests in the community of family and Iranians in exile or back in Iran. The community they invest in does not find it necessary or even appropriate for them to speak the language of the new country and blend in. However, the second-generation female characters invest in the community of natives of the host country, as they have more contacts in school or university. This community invites them to learn the language in order to belong.

As Norton and McKinney say, “[A] language learner’s motivation is mediated by investments that may conflict with the desire to speak, or, paradoxically, may make it possible for the language learner to claim the right to speak” (Norton & McKinney 2011: 84). The community of Iranians in the Diaspora expects the female characters of the first generation of exiles...
to preserve the mother tongue and teach it to the next generation. This leads to a lack of interest in second language learning. Lack of basic education, which would facilitate language acquisition, and lack of enough social interactions, are other complications that these characters struggle with when learning English. However, the female characters of the second generation learn the second language willingly, as they have more social contacts in the new world and develop integrative motivations. Below, the role of community and the expectation of language learning and its difficulties for the two generations of female characters in the case study will be discussed in greater detail.

First Generation

As transmitters and protectors of the value system of the community, the female characters of the first generation of immigrants are obliged to stick to the mother tongue and the traditional roles of a woman. However, as Norton and McKinney have shown, these communities and their expectations are imaginary:

An extension of interest in identity and investment concerns the imagined communities that language learners aspire to when they learn a language [...] Imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination (Norton & McKinney 2011: 76).

Although imaginary, the needs of these communities limit the female characters in their access to new life forms and language in the host country. Again Pavlenko and Norton write:

Norton (2000, 2001) has incorporated Wegner’s (1998) views into the study of second language learning and education, suggesting that learners have different investments in different members of target language community, and that the people in whom the learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who provide (or limit) access to the imagined community of a given learner (Pavlenko & Norton 2007: 670-671).

The limitations that the community imposes on the first generation female characters are laid down in the name of preservation of their gendered identity. This causes a lack of interest in language acquisition. In Dumas’s work the narrator claims that her mother never learned English well enough to able to read the book she wrote. This was due to the gendered roles of a mother in a traditional Iranian family, not leaving enough time and motivation for her to learn the language of the host country.

My mother’s English prevented her from reading the book. I did, however, let her know what I had written. She gave me her blessing but had a few questions. “Did you mention that I never left you with a babysitter, even though I could have? Did
you mention that I nursed you for over two years and how difficult you were to wean? Did you mention how I was always at home when you returned from school, that you never came home to an empty house?" Although none of the above made it into the book, any mother who gives her blessing to a memoir that mocks her accent has the right to tell the world that I was a pain to wean (Dumas 2004: 191).

However, investment in the imagined community of Iranians is not the only reason for preserving the mother tongue. Lack of education that facilitates language acquisition is another aspect that is closely related to gender roles and the expectations of the female characters. Dumas writes:

The problem was that my mother, like most women of her generation, had been only briefly educated. In her era, a girl’s sole purpose in life was to find a husband. Having an education ranked far below more desirable attributes such as the ability to serve tea or prepare baklava (Dumas 2004: 5).

The mother did not receive an education as a young girl. Her gendered role and function in the community did not require or allow her to acquire the average education the male subjects of her generation and social class could get in the same town in Iran. Therefore, as a middle-aged woman in the Diaspora, having the chance of learning a new language, she lacked the basic knowledge that would facilitate it. Having looked reflexively at language through the study of her own language and basic knowledge of English, offered at Iranian high schools and universities, could awaken her curiosity, motivate her to learn this language and facilitate the process of learning.

Another significant barrier for language acquisition in the first generation of exiles is lack of sufficient contact with the new society and language in the roles of housewives or employees in family businesses. Norton, in her research on immigrant women, analyses this issue as follows:

In theorizing the gendered nature of the immigrant language learner’s experience, I am concerned not only with the silencing that women experience within the context of larger patriarchal structures in society, but also with the gendered access to the public world that immigrant women, in particular, experience. It is in the public world that language learners have the opportunity to interact with members of the target language community, but it is the public world that is not easily accessible to immigrant women.... [E]ven when such access is granted, the nature of the work available to immigrant women provides few opportunities for social interaction (Norton 2000: 12-13).

Lack of social relations or having limited access to English-speaking society is a major obstacle in learning the second language for the female characters of the first generation. Their traditional role as mother and wife offers them fewer opportunities for social interactions than men or members of the second generation. They are mostly busy with taking care of the family, and
their relations are limited to neighbours and hairdressers. In *Funny in Farsi* the characters depend on the husband and father to be the link to the new world. Therefore, there is no need to participate in social life and learn the language and culture.

Moving to America was both exciting and frightening, but we found great comfort in knowing that my father spoke English. Having spent years regaling us with stories about his graduate years in America, he had left us with the distinct impression that America was his second home. My mother and I planned to stick close to him, letting him guide us through the exotic American landscape that he knew so well. We counted on him not only to translate the language but also to translate the culture, to be a link to this most foreign of lands (Dumas 2004: 8).

However, the English that the father speaks is limited to academic terms and usages. Throughout the work, the daughter declares her independence from the father by learning English when she goes to school, and she becomes more involved with the native community. Yet, this was not possible for the father as an engineer using English only in his workplace. The mother was never able to learn the language properly and spoke English with mistakes, which led to misunderstandings and inferiorisation. She also had to use her daughter as a translator or limit her relations to the community of Farsi speakers. The narrator writes, “I no longer encourage my parents to learn English. I’ve given up” (Dumas 2004: 12). In *Iranian and Diasporic Literature in the 21st Century* Grassian explains: “While she never directly states it, it is possible that Dumas has come to this resigned position because of the difficulties that she and her parents have faced while trying to assimilate” (Grassian 2013: 130).

As mentioned above, the female characters of the first generation of exiles in the memoirs and literary works under discussion have an instrumental investment in second language acquisition. The community they associate themselves with is the community of Iranians in the Diaspora with the patriarchal structure expecting them to preserve and transmit national identity and mother tongue, fearing the ‘possible selves’ that the female subject may become in the new cultural and linguistic space. Lack of basic education and social contact are other reasons for problems in second language learning in the first generation of exiles. However, the second generation of female characters is more motivated to learn English than the previous generation due to the integrative investment. Below, instances from the works and an analysis of the reasons for this phenomenon will be given.
Second Generation

Unlike the female characters of the first generation of exiles, those of the second generation are eager to learn the language and culture of the host country. The need to belong in the new world is greater in the second generation, as they are more involved in social life. They try to form identities in the Diaspora that are different from those of the first generation. These new identities require changes in the attitude towards language. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet declare, these changes are the results of the social conditions:

> The linguistic changes are not something that have [sic] simply washed over the younger generation; they are the result of girls’ finding ways of constructing kinds of selves that were not available to earlier generations. They are the result of social and linguistic strategies (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2004: 329).

While the first generation of female characters has an ‘instrumental’ motivation for learning English in the Diaspora, the motivation of female characters of the second generation is ‘integrative.’ Norton and McKinney use the definitions of these terms given by Gardner & Lambert (1972):

> [I]nstrumental motivation references the desire of language learners to learn an L2 for utilitarian purposes, such as employment, while integrative motivation references the desire to learn a language to successfully integrate with the target language community (Norton & McKinney 2011: 74).

The integrative motivation of female characters of the second generation of exiles is due to the need to belong in the new world. They do not want to live a life in-between as their parents do, and would like to experience equality in English-speaking society. The power relations included in the knowledge of the second language persuade the characters to learn the second language and consider the mother tongue as a burden. Zjaleh Hajibashi in her poem *Where Does My Language Lie?* describes this condition metaphorically:

> […]
> where I lie with which language
> unspeakable
duplicity
> took me
draws me
twice
The speaker may feel guilty for inferiorising her mother tongue, but she finds no other way to fight the marginalisation imposed on her from society. The duplicity the character faces in her identity is manifested in the two languages, the two tongues, and she finds no other way than to mute the mother tongue. Asayesh, in her memoir, also refers to this issue when the female character feels inferiorised and marginalised in the society and wants to defend her status by speaking unaccented English and rejecting her Iranian self.

Let me speak a sentence loaded with colloquialisms. See, I am fluent in English! I have no accent! I’m like you. Don’t consign me to the trash heap, where the unforgivably different belong. Don’t look at me as if I were an animal at the zoo, an object of curiosity and spurious compassion.

This inner dialogue fills me with shame, yet I am helpless against it. I have become a party to my own disenfranchisement. The worst part of being told in a thousand ways, subtle and not, that one is inferior is the way that message worms itself into the heart. It is not enough to battle the prejudice of others, one must also battle the infection within (Asayesh 2002: 210-11).

To the character ‘Gelareh’ in this work, belonging in the new world means rejection of the language and membership of the community of Iranians. She does not find herself alone in this. Throughout the narrative, she meets other female characters of the second generation who avoid using the mother tongue and reject their Iranian identity. Asayesh continues:

The need to belong is a powerful thing. It pits those of us who are children of other worlds against ourselves and one another.

It made the Iranian clerk I encountered a few years ago at Bloomingdale’s, in Rockville, Maryland, stare coldly when I spoke to her in Farsi. She rang up my sale without a word. A few months later, when an Iranian handed me the numbered tag
I took into the dressing room of another department store, I was careful to thank her in English. I pretended that I did not recognize the almond skin, arched eyebrows, and glossy hair of a countrywoman (Asayesh 2002: 210).

Of course, knowing the language without understanding the culture to which the language is bound would not reduce the sense of inferiority and marginality in the subjects. Asayesh claims elsewhere that:

It didn’t matter that this second time in America I spoke English. If anything, my extensive vocabulary contributed to making me an outcast. I did not understand about fitting in, I did not know what it meant to be cool (Asayesh 2002: 103).

This sense of powerlessness and inferiority causes resistance to learning the mother tongue and national culture. These struggles and resistances to defend the subject against the sense of being different in terms of language and, by extension, identity, are strongest when the subjects are in the community of school and college. They need to be accepted and belong. They try to avoid in-betweenness by sticking to the dominant language and culture and ignoring the expectation of the family or community of Iranians to learn the mother tongue and national values. However, this does not mean that the mother tongue and culture can be completely ignored. Menard-Warwick, using the ideas of Davies and Harré (1990: 48) and Weeden (1987), explains that despite social conditions, the characters are able to make decisions regarding their participation in a discourse.

Like Weeden, they [Davies and Harré] explore how discourses define the people who use them in terms of subject positions, that is, socially recognisable categories. However, they also emphasise that human beings can make choices in regards to their discursive participation, choices that often stem from an individual’s ‘history as a subjective being, that is, the history of one who has been in multiple positions and engaged in different forms of discourses’ (Menard-Warwick 2009: 38).

Female characters of the second generation establish a need and choose to belong to the Iranian national identity and mother tongue as adults, because they have overcome the feeling of inferiority that is associated with them. The speaker in Parissa Milani’s poem American Again knows that the key to belonging is the language and that she cannot be considered Iranian if she speaks English or Farsi with an English accent. Therefore, she chooses silence and needs the community of Iranians to accept her. However, she knows that this will lead to suffocation. She will miss the right to speak and the freedom associated with American society. She wonders if it is possible for her to return to her American self and language whenever she wishes.

I am Iranian

until I open my mouth. Then
I am American.

But if I promise to not even breathe

through my mouth, will you take me in?

Will you take me to the Caspian Sea

and tell me it’s always been so close?

[...]

Will you understand when

it gets hard for me to

breathe easy and I become


This double identity and belonging to two different languages and worlds lead to in-betweenness and, paradoxically, belonging to neither language nor culture. In her poem *Tales Left Untold*, Aphrodite Desiree Navab describes this situation using the metonymy of ‘tongue’ for language:

My tongue is twisted

My tongue is tied

My tongue is torn with all the lies

Each time I turn it this way and that

An unfamiliar sound spins its way out

One half screams for the other to come

The other half stands there completely numb

One half knows not what the other half speaks

One half scorns what the other half seeks

My tongue, it trips me

Leading me there

Trapping me in the storyteller’s snare

One half leaves while the other half stays

One half sees what the other betrays (Karim 2006: 287).
The character’s identity is torn in two, and each half has its own language. The two selves and tongues, however, are in need of each other, although they are never at peace. This oscillation between two languages and identities can lead to a constant fear of losing one half while sticking to the other. The characters are scared of the people they may become, the ‘possible selves’. As Pavlenko and Norton say, citing Wegner and Markus & Nurius:

[Possible selves] represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, thus linking cognition, behavior, and motivation. For both Wegner and Markus and Nurius, possible selves, linked to membership in imagined communities, shape individuals’ present and future decisions and behaviors and provide an evaluative and interpretive context for such decisions, behaviors, and their outcomes (Pavlenko & Norton 2007: 670).

The character Gelareh in Asayesh’s memoir tries to reduce her fear of the possible selves she or her children may become by insisting on transmitting the national identity to the next generation (mostly the daughter as her continuation) through teaching the mother tongue. Asayesh writes:

I know that language is the lifeblood of culture. Language is the self, reflected and clothed in nouns and verbs and adjectives. Without Farsi, the Iranian in Mina will shrivel up and die. Even as I think this, I know that my greatest fear is of my own inner shriveling, not Mina’s. In guarding Mina’s heritage, I guard my own, for they are linked. My daughter, this piping voice in my house speaking the words I learned at my mother’s knee, is a lifeline to my first self […] I feel like a beached whale, slowly drying up (Asayesh 2002: 213).

The national identity of the subject is here deeply associated with the mother tongue. As Elahi writes in Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women’s Memoirs:

These images (a beached whale, the inner self shriveling up and dying, the self as the victim of erosion) represent a relatively static sense of identity but a dynamic sense of language. They naturalise the self as inert, and lead Asayesh to fall back onto fairly rigid distinctions between Iran and America (Elahi 2006: 470).

The narrator in Asayesh’s memoir does not believe in hybrid identity and draws a clear line between Iranian and American identities. This is also the case when it comes to languages. Although she refers to language as fluid, this does not mean that her two languages can dissolve each other. “Language, I remind myself, is fluid. What is lost can be regained. This time next year, when we go back to Iran, it will be the English words that take a back seat. Bilingualism, like biculturalism, is a seesaw” (Asayesh 2002: 213). The oscillation that the character experiences in terms of identity is extended to the languages she speaks. As Elahi puts it:
For Asayesh, language is (or languages are) both seesaw and sea; their access to truth and the richness of their textures can only be experienced in an alternation between one and another tongue, not in the space between or on one side alone (Elahi 2006: 470).

The character seeks to belong to both Iranian and American identities, but not a third hybrid one. The dominance of the Iranian self requires the oblivion of the American one; otherwise the character feels lost in the arbitrariness of the language of the Other. Asayesh describes this condition in this way:

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, the words of my first language bursting into my mouth from some long-suppressed place. For days afterward, the English words feel like foreign objects on my tongue, metallic and cold, like the loose filling of a tooth. I walk around full of hidden despair until I manage once again to forget my childhood self (Asayesh 2002: 174).

To make a compromise and a relationship between these two languages, and consequently between the two selves, the main character in Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad tries to translate from Persian to English. Translating provides the character with a chance to make a compensation between the two languages and therefore the two identities that are always in conflict with each other and leave the character in a permanent detachment, and, as she puts it, a “sense of foreignness.”

The urge to translate, this preoccupation with language I had dragged around with me, had been a resistance to the sense of foreignness I felt everywhere - a distraction from the restlessness that followed me into each hemisphere. If I could only have conquered words, purged from my Farsi any trace of accent, imported the imagery of Persian verse into English prose, I had thought, then the feeling of displacement would go away (Moaveni 2006: 234).

The female characters of the second generation of Iranians in the Diaspora, as reflected in the case study, live with a paradox and conflict between two selves and two languages, which is a result of bilingualism and biculturalism in the Diaspora. No matter how hard they try to preserve their linguistic selfhood, hybridity in language and identities is inevitable as an important consequence of the Diaspora. Below I will explain the characteristics of linguistic hybridity in the texts mentioned.

**Writing in the Language of the Other**

The stylistic characteristics of the works mentioned are quite significant. The authors have chosen to write in English as it is the language they have mastered as a written language in the American education system. Besides, writing in English can make their works accessible to a larger audience and their voices can be heard more widely. This means that they are writing for
the Other, using the language of the Other. But one of the most important reasons is the freedom they feel to write everything in English. However, this does not satisfy them, as they also want to make a connection with the members of the community of Iranians in exile. This will give them a sense of belonging and attachment. To overcome this paradox, they develop a hybrid language:

Organic, unconscious hybridity is a feature of the historical evolution of all languages. Applying it to culture and society more generally, we may say that despite the illusion of boundedness, cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions. [...] Intentional hybrids create an ironic double consciousness, a collision between differing points of views on the world (Bakhtin 1981: 360).

Hybridity, as Bakhtin says, is the fate of a language. The ‘double consciousness’ of female subjects in the Iranian Diaspora makes them create a hybrid language that is capable of transmitting their inner conflicts. They write in a threshold language, a variety of English that is enriched with Persian words and grammar and is understandable for the members of the community. It is a language that belongs to this community. On the other hand, it gives them the advantages of writing in English as a dominant language and language of freedom. Elahi, using the term ‘accented identity’ introduced by Taghi Modarressi in Writing with an Accent (1992) writes “The notion of accented identity, and specifically of accented writing, can help us understand how Iranian-Americans might transform the trauma of a language lost into the celebration of a self regained or reconstructed, a translation of identity into a new language or through a dialectical relationship between two languages” (Elahi 2006: 464). Below is a discussion of the dimensions of this accented language that the female characters of the selected literary works use, with their hyphenated and in-between identities.

Use of Persian Words and Grammatical Structure in English

The implied authors in the works mentioned have a specific usage of English, which includes Persian words or proverbs roughly translated into English. This enables them to write for the community they belong to, or would like to belong to - the community of Iranians in exile. As Eckert & McConnell-Ginet say in Language and Gender, each community has its own language use:

[Patterns of language choice are built into the social fabric of the community. Speakers may borrow lexical items from one language to another, they may use different language in different situations and with different people, they may use more than one language in the same conversation – code-switching from one turn to another, or within sentences.
These strategies make social meaning in much the same way as variation within the same language (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 270).

Use of this language form gives a sense of separateness from the English-speaking American natives. This leads to the formation of a unique social identity based on the insider/outsider boundaries. Bahrampour writes, “It is fun to speak like this, to lazily pick the best words from each side and form a fused language you’d have to be one of us to understand” (Bahrampour 1999: 191).

Some instances of this fused language in the texts occur when the subject brings in Persian words with or without an introduction. This accented language is organic to the accented identity of the characters, as Modaressi suggests (1992: 7-9). Another very good example is that of Bahrampour:

My Farsi life swims darkly below my English life. It surfaces whenever I talk to anyone who is not from my school or my immediate family. The more I speak it, the more I notice I’ve picked up words I don’t remember having learned. In fact, there are some words I only know in Farsi, words my family uses no matter which language we are speaking. Khash-khash is a hard green oblong pod the size of my fist, which Ali and I split open to shake out handfuls of white seeds that pop between our teeth like tiny pearls. Toot is a musky purple or white berry that grows on trees, and joob is the trench between street and sidewalk that carries water through the city, getting slower and blacker the further south it goes (Bahrampour 1999: 50).

Discussing this excerpt from Bahrampour’s memoir, Elahi writes:

The implied authors resist translation as they believe this will blur the connotations of the word and its vocal characteristics. In contrast to Asayesh’s beached whale, Bahrampour’s Persian is almost like a shark (swimming darkly) below the surface of conscious speech (Elahi 2006: 471).

Through the language, the implied author tries to draw a line between those who belong to the community and can understand the language and those who are outsiders.

Moaveni writes: “I realized that some of my most integral parts resisted translation. It was only in not being able to transport them into another language that I saw how much they mattered” (Moaveni 2006: 68). This inability to translate or avoidance of translation differentiate the language of the diasporic subject from that of the Other, and reminds her how important these words are as metonymies for her Iranian self.

Even when the subject translates a Persian dialogue in English, she does not try to create a perfectly understandable text for the Other. On the contrary,
the translations keep the grammatical format of the mother tongue, the proverbs are translated word for word and no equivalent is given as in Bahrampour’s text:

To keep my head warm... [to keep someone busy]

Don’t be tired [Keep up the good work]

God take care of you. [God bless you] (Bahrampour 1999: 141, my translation)

The subjects try to enrich the English language by using Persian words that do not have an English equivalent. The main character ‘Firoozeh’, in Funny in Farsi, uses Persian words for familial relations as they are more exact than the ones in English. And she continues using them throughout the memoir as a normal word.

Growing up in Iran, I was surrounded not by snow or tanned people, but by relatives. Not surprisingly, my native language, Persian, contains many more precise words for relatives than does the English language. My father’s brothers are my amoo. My mother’s brother is a dye-yee. My aunts’ husbands are either shohar ammeh or shohar khaleh, depending on which side of the family they are from. In English, all these men are simply my ‘uncles.’ Only one word describes their children in English, ‘cousin,’ whereas in Persian, we have eight words to describe the exact relationship of each cousin (Dumas 2004: 96-97).

Farsi is used as a resistance method against the Other language, English, in some of the works of the case study. The characters use English in a significant way: they use Persian grammar in translating a Persian dialogue, or Persian words in English alphabets. This puts language somewhere between Persian and English. This language is specific for the member of the community of Iranians in exile, the community that the characters long to belong to. Through this language the subjects can manifest their dual identities properly.

However, for some of the female subjects of the selected literary works of Iranian women in the Diaspora, English is not only associated with inferiorisation and marginality. Their fluency in English and the freedom connected with this language encourages them to write in English. Below I will elaborate on this in more detail.

Using English as the Language of Taboos and Secrets

English for the implied authors of the mentioned works seems to be the language in which they can write easily, as they are all educated in western systems. They admit that, using English, they can talk about forbidden aspects of Iranian culture. The reason may be the close association of culture
and language: the taboos in a culture are not to be performed by the members of the community and not to be spoken about in its language.

English has become an important part of the identity of the female subjects of, specifically, the second generation of exiles. It is through this language that they can express the inner conflicts between their two displaced selves. Their knowledge of Farsi is not sufficient to fulfil all their linguistic needs as they have learned it only in a domestic environment. One of the female characters in Moaveni’s work names it “kitchen Farsi,” a colloquial Persian limited to “Gossiping with family and whining to my parents,” with “no special fluency,” leaving the speakers “ill-equipped to hold abstract conversations with the highly literate” (Moaveni 2006: 89). The narrator of Moaveni’s memoir, with the same knowledge of Farsi, mentions that she uses English words in her Farsi conversations and makes a hybrid language to be able to communicate. But trying to speak pure Farsi she realizes “that without English, I, as I knew myself, ceased to exist” (Moaveni 2006: 89). As Elahi puts it “Moaveni tells us explicitly of the pain and violence she feels in losing a self that exists neither in the United States nor in Iran, but in the English language” (Elahi 2006: 472). English has become a part of the identity of the subject as much as Farsi, the mother tongue.

Another important reason for the sense of freedom in writing in English is the association of this language as the language of ‘the Land of the Free’, with security and liberty. The narratives associated with the mother tongue are mostly devastating while English reminds the subject of successful challenges to win freedom. Moaveni explains it in her work as follows:

[T]he very act of speaking English invoked a sense of freedom. It was the language in which I had fought many battles, but it was also the language of an alternative existence in which I never felt fear. It was unpolluted by the brutality of the things I heard and spoke about in Farsi, like arrests of activists and the killings of dissidents. Of course I wrote about them in English, but exported across the border of another language, their horror was somehow muted (Moaveni 2006: 89).

Fear, no matter how imaginary, is dominant in the mentality of the subject when she speaks in Farsi, while English reminds her of security. Therefore, she prefers to speak of her private life and social criticism in English to feel more at peace. However, even in private life and issues such as love and sexuality, Farsi does not help the character express herself. Moaveni writes:

I tried to explain, dismayed to see notions like ‘I need space’ evaporate into meaninglessness in Farsi. It was as though the soft, soap-opera lighting of English had been switched off, and replaced by the harsh, fluorescent glare of Farsi (Moaveni 2006: 68).
As the notions of love and lust are differently understood in the Iranian and American cultures, the vocabulary and expressions for them are untranslatable in the language of the other culture. Also the taboo words that are unspeakable in Farsi can be mentioned in English. This includes sexual talks, in Moaveni’s memoir, or use of swear words in Asayesh’s work. Gelareh, the narrator of the latter memoir writes: “I use too many swear words in English but know none in Farsi” (Asayesh 2002: 173). As swear words and sexual issues are taboos for girls in Iranian culture, the subject does not know the Farsi vocabulary for them. But since in the American culture in which they are brought up referring to these subjects is not gendered, the subject knows the proper expressions. The implied authors of the memoirs mentioned feel free to swear and talk about sex in English as their American selves, interwoven with English, allow them to do so, while their Iranian selves prohibit it.

The incapacity of family members to understand colloquial English gives the subjects a chance to use this language for their secret talks and writing. Gelareh in Asayesh’s memoir says: “By the time we returned to Tehran, English was the language in which my sister and I communicated best. It was the language of our private exchanges, our furious fights and games and bargains” (Asayesh 2002: 66-67). Speaking in English, the subject can benefit from the freedom achieved through her unique knowledge of vernacular English. The family members in Iran speak English very little or not at all. Therefore, they cannot observe and control the secret conversations of the two girls. So they can enjoy their freedom although they are living in a rather oppressive atmosphere for female characters.

As we have seen above, the implied authors and characters have a dual relationship with the English language. It detaches them from the community of Iranians in the Diaspora and Iran, but at the same time it is the language that gives them freedom to write about this community and speak of different aspects of their identity without fear. It is the language of modern and free countries and, therefore, it gives them a sense of security when they express their inner conflicts in this language.

Conclusion

Second language acquisition affects the identity formation of female characters of the recent literary works of Iranian female writers in the Diaspora. The generations to which the female immigrants belong are of great importance in language acquisition and use. As transmitters and protectors of the value system of the community, the female characters of the first generation of immigrants are supposed to preserve the mother
tongue. On the contrary, the female characters of the second generation are eager to learn the language and culture of the host country as an integration requirement.

The freedom the subjects feel when writing in English, enables them to use this language to express their inner feelings and identity concerns. However, they are also willing to use their mother tongue as the best means to represent their Iranian identity. As they are always in-between two cultures, they experience an aporia in their language choice. As Elahi argues, speaking of some of the works mentioned in this paper, “[T]hese narratives of self do speak in a language between; they are written with an accent, or, at the very least they narrate the process of losing that accent” (Elahi 2006: 479). This in-between-ness leads to the creation of a personal hybrid (English) language and finds a home in English by mixing it with Persian words and proverbs. This is the language they can belong to and express themselves with, the language of the third space they live in, the space in between, the threshold.

References


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