Tales of Two Cities: Tehran in Persian Fiction[1]

M.R. Ghanoonparvar
Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at Austin

To my knowledge, the only city in Iran that in the twentieth century was divided in people's minds into north and south is Tehran. In general, while north Tehran, for the most part, occupies the more elevated slopes and foothills of the Alborz Mountain range, south Tehran extends to the flatlands that eventually lead to the deserts that encompass other cities such as Qom. North Tehran, with its Western-style buildings and streets, already had the appearance of a modern city in the mid-twentieth century, whereas south Tehran remained an old city with twisting, narrow alleyways and streets and mud-brick houses. To Iranians and foreign visitors alike, north Tehran exhibited an image of affluence, a city with an appetite for change, one that displayed the glittering hues of modern metropolitan progress and the absence of religious moral constraints. In

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M.R. Ghanoonparvar is a professor emeritus of Persian and comparative literature at The University of Texas at Austin. He has published widely on Persian literature and culture in both English and Persian and is the author of numerous books, most recently *Iranian Film and Persian Fiction* (Mazda, 2016) and *Dining at the Safavid Court* (Mazda, 2016). His translations include Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *By the Pen* (Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1988), Sadeq Chubak's *The Patient Stone* (Mazda, 1989), and Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* (Mage, 1990).

contrast, south Tehran continued to be seen as a traditional Islamic city resistant to change, a city that seemed to have been abandoned in some past century, immersed in poverty, with little economic and social progress, still stubbornly holding on to the trappings of a traditional religious society. This contrast between north and south Tehran, symbolically perhaps representing a contrast between north Tehran and the remainder of Iran, is the subject of a 1969 poem by the prominent poet Esma'il Kho'i.

Kho'i begins his poem "Shomal Niz" ("North, Too"), with a prediction of sorts: "Rain shall destroy the southern part of the city." Repeating the same line, he continues: "And I, astonishingly, will not be sad."[2]

The poetic persona wishes for the "cloud" to be the source of the flood that destroys the southern part of the city, professing

I have faith in the cloud
I am certain that the cloud knows
And it will not scatter its seeds
Lapful by lapful, impudently over the heads of these
famished people.
The southern part of the city shall be destroyed
And there is no room at all for sorrow, no room at all for sorrow:
The southern part of the city MUST be destroyed.
Injustice?
No! This is not injustice
Injustice is to take pity on the ditches.
Injustice is to take pity on the bushes dwelling in the valleys,
To be a peak and to pity the valley.
Injustice has always been so
The flood says so
I say so:
Injustice has always been so.

[2]Esma'il Kho'i, "Shomal Niz," *Gozineh-ye She'rha-ye Esma'il Kho'i* (Tehran: Sepehr, 1978–79), 78–84. All translations from Persian are mine unless otherwise noted. The poem was originally rendered into English for a discussion of the poem in a different context in M.R. Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom: Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 52–56.

And the flood says
"All ditches must be filled
And there should be no mountains or valleys."[3]

The socioeconomic differences between the "famished people" of south Tehran, who, according to the speaker of the poem, dwell in the "valleys," and the affluent in north Tehran, who are at the "peak," would have been quite evident to Kho'i's audience. Hence, Tehran is portrayed as a city of inequality and injustice, for the elimination of which the speaker contends that both parts shall and must be destroyed:

The southern part of the city shall be destroyed by the water's debris
And the northern part of the city
By the destruction of the south[4]

Kho'i is not the only Iranian literary artist whose portrayal of Tehran is gloomy. An overview of modern Persian fiction since its inception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows that almost all Iranian writers who use Tehran, fully or partially, as the backdrop for their stories present a similar picture. Published in Cairo in 1895, the first modern Persian novel, *Siyahatnameh-ye Ebrahim Beyg* (*The Travel Diary of Ebrahim Beyg*) is the story of a young Egyptian-born Iranian who is instructed in his father's will to visit his ancestral homeland, which the father has described as paradise on earth. However, the novel provides a picture of the entire country, and Tehran in particular, which appears to Ebrahim more like hell than paradise.[5] Ebrahim summarizes his impressions of the Qajar capital at the end of his visit to Tehran. Regarding the businesspeople, for instance, he writes: "The merchant class does not give any thought to the advancement of commerce or its expansion. They follow the same path that their predecessors did. In all of Tehran not a single company has been founded for propagating the goods and products of the country. Although there are several owners

[3]Kho'i, "Shomal Niz," 81–82.

[4]Kho'i, "Shomal Niz," 84.

[5]Zeynolabedin Maragheh'i, *Siyahatnameh-ye Ebrahim Beyg*, 3rd ed. 1895. (Tehran: Andisheh, 1975).

with sufficient capital, they don't trust one another. Even in business deals they move very cautiously with each other. All they think about is stepping on the other."[6] He concludes his remarks about the city by saying that all the inhabitants of the city are "defective in intellect and deficient in faith," and adds, "They're dead, but alive; alive, but dead."[7]

Despite the drastic efforts to modernize the country and the initial manifestations of these efforts in the capital city, not only did the transition from the Qajar dynasty to the Pahlavi dynasty not significantly change the negative image of Tehran in literary works, but in some ways, it increased it. The face of certain central areas in Tehran changed, but in literature, Tehran continued to be portrayed as a horrible city.

In fact, the title of one of the earliest social novels, by Morteza Moshfeq-Kazemi, is *Tehran-e Makhowf (Horrid Tehran*).[8] This novel was published in 1925, the year of the coronation of Reza Shah, who had consolidated his powers over the country about four years after virtually dismantling the Qajar rule in a coup d'état. The plot of the story, which follows a traditional love tale of two young people, Mahin and Farrokh, is a pretext for its author to show the ongoing corruption in the city, mainly through the machinations of Mahin's father, who is attempting to secure a position of power for himself. In addition, Moshfeq-Kazemi describes the "horribleness" of Tehran by taking his characters, especially Mahin's father and the son of an aristocrat whom he prefers to marry his daughter, to visit the seamier side of Tehran, such as the houses of prostitution and opium dens.

Other writers of the same period, perhaps most prominently Mohammad Hejazi and Ali Dashti, also use Tehran as the locale of their stories. To many writers, certain aspects of modernization, especially the entry of women into the arena of social life, seem to be a harbinger of moral corruption and deviation.

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[6]Zayn ol-Abedin Maraghe'i, *The Travel Diary of Ebrahim Beg,* trans. James D. Clark (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2006), 139–40.

[7]Maraghe'i, *Travel Diary*, 140.

[8]For a discussion of this novel, see Hasan Abedini, *Sad Sal Dastannevisi*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Tandar, 1989), 36–38.

In his novels, *Homa* (1928) *Parichehr* (1929), and *Ziba* (1930), which are all named after their female protagonists, Hejazi uses the Tehran upper-middle-class setting with which he was most familiar and chooses his characters as representatives of this class.[9] *Homa* is the story of a young, educated girl who is in love with a young man; but when by chance she discovers that her deceased father's close friend, who is now her guardian and whom she greatly respects and admires, is in love with her, she decides to devote her life to him. Tehran becomes the site of a series of vicious machinations by Homa's former suitor, who now considers the guardian to be his rival and tries to take revenge, assisted by a corrupt cleric. In *Parichehr*, Hejazi didactically cautions his audience against moral corruption, the victims of which are usually young women, in cities that are rapidly becoming modern, such as Tehran. In his last novel of this period, *Ziba*, Hejazi moralizes about governmental, political, and bureaucratic corruption, in particular in the capital city. The story revolves around Hoseyn, a young seminary student from a village, who comes to Tehran to study and to make a better life for himself. In Tehran, he meets Ziba, a well-known prostitute with many government connections. Hoseyn develops a taste for modern life, and Ziba influences him to become involved in all sorts of evil acts in order to advance.[10]

Hejazi and Dashti were often criticized by writers of the following generations for focusing on the affluent classes and characters in the capital city and disregarding the rest of the people in Tehran and the entire country.[11] But there were also writers, such as Mohammad Mas'ud of the same generation, who wrote about a different class of characters, such as young lower-class people. In his novels published

[9]All these novels are discussed in detail in Hassan Kamshad's *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), in which he devotes over ten pages to a discussion of Hejazi's work.

[10]For a detailed sociological discussion of *Ziba*, see Jamshid Mesbahipur-Iraniyan, *Vaqe'iyyat-e Ejtema'i va Jahan-e Dastan* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Amir Kabir, 1979), 60–74.

[11]Such criticism even appeared in satirical form in Sadeq Chubak's 1966 novel, *Sang-e Sabur*. For a translation of this novel, see Sadeq Chubak, *The Patient Stone*, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1989).

in the early 1930s, *Tafrihat-e Shab* (*Fun at Night*) and *Dar Talash-e Ma'ash* (*Striving to Make a Living*), for instance, Mas'ud describes the lives of these young working-class men who struggle to survive in the rapidly changing city of Tehran by any means possible, even by engaging in illicit acts. His novels also detail the men's indulgence in Tehran's nightlife, including visits to taverns and the brothels of Shahr-e No (New City), Tehran's notorious red-light district.

The efforts of Reza Shah and his government to modernize the country initially came to fruition, even if superficially, in the capital city. The emergence of the social novels of the 1920s and early 1930s, represented in this discussion by the works of Moshfeq-Kazemi, Hejazi, and Mas'ud, was the inevitable outcome of the new Tehran as the only "modern" city in the country at the time. The creation of this modern city at the center of the still pre-capitalist rural and agricultural country would be conducive to all sorts of social and moral evils seemingly inherent in modern cities.

An anomaly to the social novels of the early 1930s is the best-known piece of Persian fiction, Sadeq Hedayat's *Buf-e Kur* (*The Blind Owl*), which was written in the mid-1930s and presents at best an ambivalent picture of the city.[12] Hedayat uses Ray (or Rey), the ancient city that eventually was absorbed by modern Tehran, as the locale of his novel, since this ancient city lends itself more suitably to the themes and subject matter of this work.[13] The Ray/Tehran of *Buf-e Kur* is a city having undergone drastic changes within a span of less than two decades. While Tehran had assumed the appearance of a modern city, this ancient city seemed to resist change. Ray was completely overshadowed by the growing metropolis of Tehran. All that remained of it consisted of ancient ruins and old, dilapidated houses with poverty-stricken inhabitants.

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[12]Sadeq Hedayat, *Buf-e Kur*, 13th ed. (Tehran: Entesharat-e Amir Kabir), 1973.

[13]For an enlightening view of Hedayat's use of Ray in *The Blind Owl*, see Elton Daniel, "History as a Theme of *The Blind Owl*," in *Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After*, ed. Michael C. Hillmann (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1978), 76–86.

Buf-e Kur is a surrealistic representation of the same city and time frame as appears in the novels of Moshfeq-Kazemi and Mas'ud. One inhabitant of the city, the narrator of *Buf-e Kur*, refers to it as the "Bride of the World":

> Opening off my room is a dark closet. The room itself has two windows facing out onto the world of the rabble. One of them looks onto our own courtyard, the other onto the street, forming thereby a link between me and the city of Rey, the city they call the 'Bride of the World', with its thousand-fold web of winding streets, its host of squat houses, its schools and its caravanserais. The city which is accounted the greatest city in the world is breathing and living its life there beyond my room.[14]

But to the narrator, the "Bride of the World" is the world of the "rabble," or the riffraff.

In his controversial satirical novel, *Tup-e Morvari* (*The Pearl Cannon*), Hedayat establishes a more direct link between Ray and Tehran.[15] In the form of a fictional petition written by women to "His Majesty," who has ordered the pearl cannon (the women's favorite edifice, which grants their wishes) to be removed from the center of the city, Hedayat fabricates various humorous etymologies for the name of the city of Tehran. Regarding one of these, he writes that according to a "reliable *hadith*"

> the origin of the word Tehran is "tah-e uran," which means the city of those with naked buttocks, because its inhabitants perpetually cleaned themselves and refrained from wearing pants. According to another account, the origin of the word is "tah ran," which is derived from "tah," which means bottom, and "ran," which means drive. More precisely, it means those who drive on their bottoms, in

[14]Sadeq Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. D.P. Costello (New York: Evergreen, 1969), 51.

[15]Although written in 1947, *Tup-e Morvari* was not published in Iran until 1979, and then, under the pseudonym Hadi Sedaqat; it was banned soon after. It was later published in the United States under Sadeq Hedayat's own name as *Tup-e Morvari*, ed. Iraj Bashiri (Lexington, KY: Mazda Publishers, 1986).

other words, on their buttocks. Later on, this name, which referred to the inhabitants, became the name of this area. To explain further, at the time of the Arab invasion, the inhabitants of Shar-e Ray out of fear—of course, as a sign of protest—scooted on their buttocks and took refuge to the slopes of Alborz Mountain, which is the location of Tehran today, and they did not go back to Shar-e Ray any more.[16]

The Tehran of the first part of the twentieth century, which Hedayat describes mockingly, is a city that is, as one critic observes, "as though the place and its inhabitants did not belong to each other or to Iran."[17]

Perhaps Hedayat and other writers of the decades prior to World War II who viewed Reza Shah's efforts to modernize and change the face of Tehran in particular as superficial and sham intentionally focused attention on Tehran's seamier side and the negative aspects of life in the rapidly growing city; this may have been done in reaction to the shah's dictatorial rule. This mode of expressing dissidence was largely due to strict censorship and the iron hand of the government in dealing with anyone who dared oppose or even criticize it. In the 1940s, with the forced abdication of Reza Shah and the entry of the Allied forces into the country, the so-called "spring of freedom," a period of relative relaxation of restrictions, began. During this time, both established and younger writers began to publish stories that were more explicitly critical of the government, although still many were about Reza Shah's era. In the works of writers such as Sadeq Chubak, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and Ebrahim Golestan, who began their literary careers in the politicized social climate of the 1940s, Tehran, often the backdrop of their stories, is a schizophrenic city, one of contrasts and contradictions, where traditional and modern life seem to encounter one another with reluctance. Moreover, while earlier writers such as Hejazi focused their attention on social and moral corruption, this new generation often seemed to be more interested in presenting individual portraits of inhabitants of the city, who are referred to as the "riffraff" by the narrator of *Buf-e Kur* and who include members of all social classes.

[16]Hedayat, *Tup-e Morvari*, 16.

[17]Iraj Bashiri, *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat* (Lexington, KY: Mazda Publishers, 1984), 154.

Tehran is a city of paradoxes, an unhappy gathering place of the poor and the affluent, in Chubak's first collection of short stories, *Kheymehshabbazi* (*Puppet Show*), published in 1945.[18] In "Golhay-e Gushti" ("Flowers of Flesh"), in a crowded street of the city, we find Morad, a homeless opium addict and alcoholic who becomes intoxicated at the sight and scent of a woman in a provocative Western-style dress with poppy-flower prints, as he tries to evade paying his meager debt to a shopkeeper.[19] Chubak's portrayal of Tehran continues to be negative, even in stories published more than a decade later—for example, in "Asb-e Chubi" ("The Wooden Horse"), written from the perspective of a young French woman married to an Iranian from a traditional family.[20] With the experience of having lived in Iran for three years with her husband, Jalal, the woman is spending her final hours in Iran in a bare room alone with her young son on a cold Christmas night. Reviewing her past, she recalls how she fell in love with and married Jalal, and after the birth of their son, came to live in Tehran. Her unpleasant impressions and memories include the nauseating smell of the outhouse of her in-laws' home upon her arrival; the sickly siblings of her husband, one of whom had typhoid and died, but not before causing her to be infected with the same disease; and finally, her husband's change in character, when soon after their arrival in Iran, he married his fat, ugly cousin. Now, looking out the window at the city makes her nauseated:

> Through the window she watched the snowflakes and the black flecks of space in the street that were untouched by the snow. Cars with dazzling eyes chased after one another like scuttling ladybugs. She looked at the city's scene, at the dome and minarets of the Sepahsalar mosque. Suddenly she felt sick. She rushed out of the room to the bathroom. Here the unwashed face and bleary eyes and tousled, grubby hair that she saw in the mirror abruptly turned her stomach and she threw up in the sink.[21]

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[18]Sadeq Chubak, *Kheymehshabbazi*, 4th ed. (Tehran: Javidan, 1972).

[19]This story has been translated by John Limbert in *Iranian Studies* 1 (Summer 1968): 115–19.

[20]Sadeq Chubak, "Asb-e Chubi," in *Cheragh-e Akhar* (Tehran: Javidan, 1966), 111–31.

[21]Sadeq Chubak, "The Wooden Horse," in *Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology, 1921–1991*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad, trans. John Perry (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1991), 101–10. Quote on p. 108.

Scenes similar to those in Chubak's stories are also found in Al-e Ahmad's first collection of short stories, *Did-o Bazdid* (*Exchange of Visits*), published in 1945.[22] In these stories, however, Al-e Ahmad's general choice of setting is a public place in Tehran. The scene of "Goldan-e Chini" ("China Flower Vase") is a crowded city bus with an assortment of people. The passengers represent a microcosm of Tehran after the lifting of the ban on chadors and veiling imposed by Reza Shah a few years earlier. A well-dressed man in an overcoat and a new hat carrying an obviously precious antique vase in his gloved hand boards the bus and, finding no other seat, manages to squeeze himself between four passengers, two men and two women fully veiled in chadors, on the bench seat at the back of the bus. A shabbily dressed, happy-go-lucky, middle-aged man, who "neither wore a collar nor a tie" and "the sleeves of [whose] shirt the buttons of which had fallen off were sticking out of his stiffly-starched raincoat" and who is sitting next to the well-dressed man, becomes mesmerized by the intricate designs on the vase; and eventually, when the owner is asked and agrees to let him examine the vase, he inadvertently drops and breaks it.[23] The passengers begin to comment on the mishap, some blaming it on fate and others taking the side of the vase's owner. Unlike writers of the previous generation, in his created microcosm of the bus, rather than focusing on social, political, or moral corruption in the seemingly modernized capital, Al-e Ahmad is concerned with the behavior of individuals, with the rules of responsible conduct for living in such a city. With his detailed descriptions of the different dress, social class, and persuasion of various characters on the bus, Al-e Ahmad shows the incongruity of the city's social makeup. With a comment by the frustrated owner of the broken vase, "As a nation, we are not deserving of anything. And now that he has broken it, he blames it on fate," Al-e Ahmad seems to suggest that traditional ways, such as blaming mistakes or incompetence on fate, are incompatible with living in a modern society.[24]

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[22]Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Did-o Bazdid* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Amir Kabir, 1978).

[23]Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "Goldan-e Chini," in *Did-o Bazdid* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Amir Kabir, 1978), 71–78. Quote on p. 72.

[24]Al-e Ahmad, "Goldan e-Chini," 76.

Ebrahim Golestan's short story "Zohr-e Garm-e Tir" ("Hot Noon in July"), which was written later in the same decade, is a cynical metaphor for where Tehran, before the rest of the country, was headed in its confused and clumsy march toward modernity in the mid-1940s.[25] Pulling a cart with a heavy load in the summer heat for a long distance in the streets of the city without knowing its precise destination, an illiterate porter finally manages to get the attention of a man exiting a taxi with a bare-legged woman in a flowered dress, to have him read the address written on a crumbled piece of paper. The man looks at the address and points the porter in some direction. Sweating profusely and exhausted, the porter finally reaches the destination, or so he thinks, which is a house that is still under construction in an alleyway. A shabbily dressed man who answers the door tells the porter that no one lives in the house yet, and asks him what he has on his cart. "A refrigerator," the porter answers. "It works with electricity. It's a new thing."[26] Astonished, the man says, "Such weird things!"[27] As a product of modernity, the refrigerator not only seems an oddity to the man, but its delivery to a house under construction conveys the story's intended point: Tehran, despite the efforts to change and modernize its appearance, is still under construction and not ready for modernity. This point becomes further evident with Golestan's choice of the streets of Tehran as the backdrop of this story.

From his early stories, such as "Zohr-e Garm-e Tir," Golestan seems to have been interested in showing the incompatibility of the people, whom he viewed as traditional or at best pseudo-modern, with modernity and its products. This is also the theme of Golestan's 1974 novel, *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni* (*The Secrets of the Treasure of the Haunted Valley*), which was based on his 1971 film with the same title. In the story, a dirt-poor farmer, who accidentally finds an underground treasure, begins to buy all sorts of electric appliances and take them to his village, which does not have the basic utilities of electricity and piped-in water.[28]

[25]Ebrahim Golestan, "Zohr-e Garm-e Tir," in *Shekar-e Sayeh* (Tehran: Rowzan, 1965), 34–44.
[26]Golestan, "Zohr-e," 41.
[27]Golestan, "Zohr-e," 42.
[28]Ebrahim Golestan, *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Agah, 1974).

The location of many scenes in both the novel and the film is Tehran, which, as a modern city, is contrasted with the farmer's home village.

For many young Iranians who came to Tehran from other cities and villages for higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, Tehran often meant the University of Tehran. They would typically spend their entire three or four years of undergraduate education in the dormitories and the neighborhoods around the university campus, since anywhere else in the city they would feel like outsiders. In fact, Tehran residents pejoratively referred to them (and to other people from the provinces) as *shahrestani*, which carried the connotation of "country bumpkin." This type of reception as well as the size of the city was intimidating and alienating to such students. The 1960s were also politicized years at the university, years of student protests, riots, and clashes with the agents of SAVAK (the regime's security organization) and riot police.

Nader Ebrahimi's short story "Bad, Bad-e Mehregan" ("The Wind of Mehregan") is the fictional diary of one such student, who finds himself in this politicized university environment.[29] The students, all of whom seem to be opposed to the regime, talk about a revolution that has to happen, and they argue about whether they should fight for "bread" or for "freedom." They also debate the function of poetry in addition to whether art should be "for art's sake" or for the sake of society. All this is confusing to the provincial student, who has just begun his first year of medical school. Everyone and everything seems strange and alienating to him. Even the smells are different from those he finds familiar. The smell of the dormitory to him is "the smell of the Allies—maybe—or the smell of the Axis. The smell of wartime soldiers, the disproportionately tall Americans. And sometimes even the smell of burnt gunpowder and French perfume."[30] He even dislikes looking into people's eyes. When he takes a bus near the university, he feels "something ominous in the driver's eyes," and he continues: "Why doesn't

[29]Nader Ebrahimi, "Bad, Bad-e Mehregan," in *Hezarpa-ye Siyah va Qessehha-ye Sahra* (Tehran: Iran Ketab, 1975), 7–50.

[30]Nader Ebrahimi, "The Wind of Mehregan," trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar and Diane L. Wilcox, *Literature East and West* 20 (1976): 218–39. Quote on p. 219.

this thing or attitude have a name, a definition? Maybe it does, too, only I don't know it."[31]

To any Iranian from another part of the country, such as the protagonist of Ebrahimi's story, Tehran and its people seemed strange and alien. As the scene of many social and political upheavals, to those who come from quiet towns and villages, the city was incomprehensible and culturally distant. As a writer from the provinces, Ebrahim Rahbar conveys this sense in his 1973 collection of short stories, *Man dar Tehranam* (*I Am in Tehran*), a series of vignettes about people from all walks of life living in a large, complex twentieth-century metropolis.[32] The first story, "Kucheh" ("Alleyway"), explores the difficult lives of young girls who are brought to the city to serve as housemaids. In "Khat" ("Bus Line"), Rahbar shows the disorder and chaos caused by the inadequate public transportation system. The narrator of the title story, "Man dar Tehranam," is a young office employee, who, like many people in the city, is not from Tehran. Living in Tehran has so overwhelmed and confused him that he cannot even remember which bus to take home and winds up in the outskirts of Tehran, hoping for its destruction: "I hope for wind, a strong destructive wind, a storm that would toss the earth up into the sky, wreck everything, uproot the trees, and turn the buildings upside down. A person like me and in my situation, with this life and the world in which I find myself, what else could he wish for?"[33] "Khaneh" ("House") is a story about a house of prostitution in which we get a glimpse of the lives of its occupants, prostitutes who, in the interval between their "guests," play hopscotch in the open courtyard like little girls, and the madam who, according to one of the regular customers, owns two rental houses in the affluent section of the city.

Tehran, as the city that appears to many Iranians from the provinces to be the place where they can find jobs, has lured the protagonists of "Dar Ghorbat" ("Away from Home") and "Peygham" ("Message"); but

[31]Ebrahimi, "Wind of Mehregan," 221.

[32]Ebrahim Rahbar, *Man dar Tehranam* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publishers, 1977).

[33]Ebrahim Rahbar, "Man dar Tehranam," in *Man dar Tehranam* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publishers, 1977), 27–35. Quote on p. 32.

they soon become lost and disillusioned, as the city fails to fulfil their dreams. Likewise, the narrator of "Molaqati" ("The Visitor"), who was born in and has lived a vagrant life on the streets of Tehran, is now a peddler who sells bric-a-brac he carries on his bicycle. Tehran, however, is not kind to even the more affluent. Sina in "Eshqha" ("Loves") is a twenty-eight-year-old, educated government employee who lives with his mother in a luxury apartment. Similar to several other young men in Rahbar's short story collection, he is fed up with his life in the city. He feels like "a prisoner in the office," where all day, all they do is drink tea and no work is done, and he thinks that all of his education has been wasted.[34] His evenings are not much better, as "he sat in front of television and killed the hours, one by one, as though they had made the television programs for bored people like him."[35] At the end of the story, we find him on a bus; having left work early, he is traveling aimlessly but resolutely out of Tehran. An interesting aspect of Rahbar's vignettes in *Man dar Tehranam* is that all the stories occur in public places: in an alleyway, on the street, on a bus, in a hospital, in a house of prostitution, in a movie theater, and in an office. Privacy and private space seem to be nonexistent in the city.

Many modernist Iranian writers, who often use fiction as a vehicle for social criticism, focus their attention on the negative aspects and the poor sections of the capital city, or south Tehran, and present gloomy pictures of the city. In a series of short stories generally referred to as the "Suri stories," which were published from 1968 to 1971 in separate collections, Mahshid Amirshahi focuses on north Tehran and offers her readers a humorous image of the city.[36] The protagonist of these stories, Suri, is a teenage girl who, like her creator, belongs to a wealthy upper-middle-class family. Suri recounts her own stories, which often sound like diary entries and usually depict the idiosyncrasies of the

[34]Ebrahim Rahbar, "Eshqha," in *Man dar Tehranam* (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publishers, 1977), 93–102. Quote on p. 95.

[35]Rahbar, "Eshqha," 97.

[36]These stories were published in *Sar-e Bibi Khanom* (Tehran: Chapkhaneh-ye Taban, 1968); *Ba'd az Ruz-e Akher* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Amir Kabir, 1969); and *Beh Sigheh-ye Avval Shakhs-e Mofrad* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Buf, 1971).

members of her family and others, especially the adults; her own awkward teenage behavior; and the rapid and often uneasy comingling of Iranian and Western cultures, especially as symbolized by Tehran. Even though she nearly always seems to make fun of the city and its people, she also displays a genuine love of her city. In one story, on a snowy day, she comments, "When it snows, I'm quite fond of Tehran because it becomes a more agreeable and cleaner city."[37] Later in the same story, hearing her uncle and other adults reminisce about old times in Tehran, she thinks that it must have been "an interesting sort of place," adding

> I dearly wish that the city gates and the moat and so on were still there. It would be nice too if the streets still retained their former names [. . .] There is a map of Tehran in our house [. . .] When you look at it, you imagine it's of an entirely different place, not just because the Tehran of today has grown so huge, but because the place names have all been changed. Surely that's why Tehran is now so utterly without roots [. . .] Let me put it like this: as soon as it gets a bit of history, they start to modernize it again, changing its appearance and all its various names.[38]

In contrast to Amirshahi's Tehran of the Suri stories is the Tehran of Gholamhoseyn Sa'edi's "Ashghalduni" ("The Dump"), published a few years before the Islamic Revolution.[39] The story begins on the outskirts of Tehran, where an impoverished teenage boy (Ali) and his sickly old father are panhandling on their way to the city. Hungry and homeless, they come across a man who tells them they can make some easy money by selling their blood. This encounter serves as the teenage boy's introduction to the modern city, a city crowded with poor, hungry people; drug addicts; and money- and sex-hungry thieves, a city

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[37]In English, all the "Suri stories" were compiled and published in one volume entitled *Suri & Co.: Tales of a Persian Teenager*, trans. J.E. Knörzer (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1995). The story under discussion is "Paikan Place," 78–87, quote on p. 79.

[38]Amirshahi, "Paikan Place," 86.

[39]Gholamhoseyn Sa'edi, "Ashghalduni," in *Gur-o Gahvareh* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Agah, 1977), 93–200.

in which even its doctors are involved in illicit activities—in this case, the black market of blood taken mainly from the sick and addicts. Ali's involvement and adventures in this modern jungle begin in a hospital, where he is first seduced by an older nurse, and eventually learns how to seduce other females in the hospital. He proves to be a natural "entrepreneur," one who can survive and thrive through a series of "enterprises." With the help of hospital workers, he begins by selling hospital food to the poor people; after gaining more experience, he eventually becomes involved in the "blood business" and even becomes a spy and a snitch for the government security organization, SAVAK. Early in the story, the hospital ambulance driver, Esma'il, who views Ali as a naïve country boy, tries to help him and teach him how to behave in Tehran:

> When I say, go to hell, you have to say, You go to hell and don't come back. If I answer you back worse, you have to give me an even worse one. For every one curse, you should give a hundred curses. And if we start a fight, you can't run away, and you can't lose, either. If I slap your ears, you have to give me a good slug on the chin. If you don't do these things, you'll always be taking it on the chin. And people who take it on the chin are no good in this dump.[40]

At the end of the story, having watched the naïve teenager transform into a monstrous character who would do just about anything for money, Esma'il finds out about Ali spying for SAVAK and realizes that Ali has become a creature who is totally at home in the Tehran Esma'il earlier referred to as a "dump": "Listen, boy, I've been figuring you out all this time [. . .] You're just a hustler. You know what a hustler is? A hustler is a go-between, a pimp, a bat, a dealer in blood, a con man, a thief, someone who doesn't work but his pockets are full, understand? You're not the only one; there are lots of them."[41]

Even though disguised as a story about corruption in the medical community and blood banks, "Ashghalduni" was at the time a rather

[40]This story has been translated as "The Rubbish Heap," in Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, trans. Robert Campbell, Hasan Javadi, and Julie Scott Meisami (New York: Random House, 1981), 160–239. The quotations are taken from this translation, 191–92.
[41]Sa'edi, "Rubbish Heap," 235.

daring story about the capital of the country. For this reason, perhaps, in its film adaptation by the famed Iranian director Daryush Mehrju'i, the title was changed to *Dayereh-ye Mina* ("The Cycle"). The film was released during the upheavals of the late 1970s that led to the Islamic Revolution.

The picture of Tehran during and after those upheavals, as presented in Mahshid Amirshahi's novel *Dar Hazar* (*At Home*), is even gloomier than the one Sa'edi paints in "Ashghalduni." In the Suri stories, the upper-class teenager living in north Tehran naïvely dreams about "old Tehran" with its moats and city gates. In contrast, the Tehran in which the narrator of Amirshahi's novel lives a decade later, during the uprising in the late 1970s, is a city of riots, confusion, filth, fear, killings, death, and lawlessness. The picture she presents of Tehran in *Dar Hazar* is that of a city in transition, changing from bad to worse. The novel begins with its protagonist at her home in Tehran waking up early one morning to the voice of, oddly enough, a "town crier," announcing marshal law: "Respected inhabitants of Tehran! From this morning, in order to preserve calm in the capital city, marshal law has been declared."[42] At every corner, people are stopped and frisked. Everything is set on fire. "Tehran is burning," the narrator informs us: "Most banks, cinemas, and restaurants are the target of arsonists. The television news broadcast film of the attack on the university—prior to the start of the fires—has turned everyone into a rebel and an outlaw."[43]

However, all this occurs before the change of the regime. The narrator's depiction of Tehran after the change is far more negative. She decides to visit Riviera, one of her favorite cafés in Tehran. But Riviera has been set on fire, and she ends up in an alleyway:

> The July sun has heated the garbage next to the walls of the alleyway, and I can smell the stench of rotten food, urine, and excrement. A swarm of mosquitoes quivers on the pile of garbage with every step I take and moves up and down. Several stray dogs and cats are

[42]Mahshid Amirshahi, *Dar Hazar* (London: Cushing-Malloy, 1987), 1.

[43]Amirshahi, *Dar Hazar*, 28.

> lying down lethargically on the leftover piles of food and watermelon rinds [. . .]
>
> I'm holding my nose with one hand and with the other, I'm driving away the large flies that have mistaken me for garbage. Not even walking fast will do any good. The flies accompany me to the end of the alleyway, and I feel the stench on my skin.[44]

Eventually, she decides to leave her beloved city. The last scene is at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, and her final memory of Tehran prior to her departure is when she is subjected to a humiliating search by an "ugly, middle-aged woman" whose head is completely encased in a fitted veiled:

> The woman begins the search from the back. She snaps the elastic of my bra through my woolen blouse and says, "Undo this!" She then squats down and touches every centimeter of the edge of my skirt between her fingers.
>
> I'm struggling to undo the hooks of my bra. One of the hooks is caught on my blouse, making it impossible to separate the hook and eye [. . .] Suddenly the rough fingers of the woman feel my thighs, and immediately on both sides of my underwear, before I can show any reaction, the quick hands have pulled my underwear down to my ankles, with the skill of experienced hands that remove a bandage from a wound, not for the purpose of changing the bandage but, with merciless pleasure, only to observe that moment of intense pain with the intention of leaving the wound uncovered and unprotected [. . .] The woman, who has pulled up my skirt for a more thorough examination, releases it and says, "What's with you? You think you've got something special? I've got one just like it. If one of those roughnecks with a thick mustache [. . .]"[45]

After the Islamic Revolution, similar to the post–Reza Shah period, when both established and new writers wrote about the bygone era, many writers chose previous decades for their stories, whether

[44]Amirshahi, *Dar Hazar*, 344.

[45]Amirshahi, *Dar Hazar*, 426–27.

nostalgically or to escape the scrutinizing eyes of the censors. Hence, whenever the setting of the story is Tehran, it is most often the city prior to the revolution. For instance, although the settings of Shahrnush Parsipur's novels *Tuba va Ma'na-ye Shab* (*Tuba and the Meaning of Night*), *Zanan bedun-e Mardan* (*Women without Men*), and *Aql-e Abi* (*Blue Logos*) are all in Tehran, only the last novel is set after the revolution.[46] In all these novels, however, we get glimpses of Tehran when the city is in turmoil. In *Tuba va Ma'na-ye Shab*, which spans over a century, Tehran is in turmoil several times: during the Qajar era and the Constitutional Revolution, the 1921 coup d'état that led to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, the occupation of the country during World War II, and finally, the 1953 coup d'état that overthrew the government of Mohammad Mosaddeq.[47] The 1953 coup d'état is also the backdrop for *Zanan bedun-e Mardan*, while the Iran–Iraq War provides the backdrop for *Aql-e Abi*.[48] Interestingly, in her most popular novel, *Zanan bedun-e Mardan*, Parsipur portrays several women from various classes, all of whom live in Tehran. But in the end, their leaving the city, similar to the protagonist of Rahbar's "Eshqha," and gathering in a garden in the nearby town of Karaj suggests that they do not consider Tehran a suitable place for women.[49]

The vantage point of Amir Hasan Cheheltan's novel *Tehran, Shahr-e bi Aseman* (*Tehran, a City without a Sky*) is after the revolution and during the Iran–Iraq War; but again, most events in the story occur prior to the revolution, from World War II to the fall of the Pahlavi regime.[50] The protagonist of the story, Keramat, is a south Tehran street thug in

[46]Shahrnush Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma'na-ye Shab* (Tehran: Esperak, 1989); *Zanan bedun-e Mardan* (Tehran: Noqreh, 1989); and *Aql-e Abi* (San Jose, CA: Zamaneh Publishers, 1994). The last novel was originally typeset in Tehran, but its publication was prevented. *Aql-e Abi* has been translated by M.R. Ghanoonparvar as *Blue Logos* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2020).

[47]*Tuba va Ma'na-ye Shab* was translated into English as *Tuba and the Meaning of Night* by Havva Houshmand and Kamran Talattof (New York: The Feminist Press, 2006).

[48]Two English translations of *Zanan bedun-e Mardan* as *Women without Men* have been published: one by Kamran Talattof and Jocelyn Sharlet (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998) and another by Faridoun Farrokh (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013).

[49]Visual artist Shirin Neshat directed the 2009 film adaptation of this novel.

[50]Amir Hasan Cheheltan, *Tehran, Shahr-e bi Aseman* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Negah, 2001).

this enigmatic narrative, who now lives with his family in a luxury house in an affluent section of Tehran. In his younger days and throughout his life in the city, he has been involved in all kinds of illegitimate work, and even though he remains involved in illegal enterprises such as smuggling drugs and antiques, his conscience seems to have triggered a world of nightmares for him, considering all his past crimes. These nightmares, which make up most of the novel, run through his mind as on a movie screen, from knife wielding to prostitution, to having had a hand in looting Prime Minister Mosaddeq's home as a crony of Sha'ban Bimokh, the leader of the street thugs who supported the shah during the 1953 coup d'état.[51] His recollections describe Tehran before the Islamic Revolution as a megacity "as large as an ocean" with thousands of streets, parks with flowers and fountains, but also migrants from the provinces who lived on the outskirts of old Tehran.

Keramat recollects that the people of the city made him sick: "The explicit manhood of these people, under the pressure of mimicking the effeminate gestures of women, expensive perfumes and powders, European jewelry and foods and steaks that you could only eat with knives and forks, short skirts and tight pants, universities and bookstores, and in short, the Tehranis' offensive mimicry, was moving in the direction of femininity."[52] He adds that "the sense of honor in the Tehrani men had hit bottom," and that "Tehran had become a center for odd things, the center for strange behavior."[53] Given his confused state of mind, it would be farfetched to categorize Keramat's recollections of Tehran in the past as nostalgic, since he now believes that the revolution that transformed the city was a good thing, and that it occurred because the poor migrants from the provinces still had a sense of honor that the effeminate Tehrani men lacked.

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[51]"Sha'ban Bimokh" was the street name of Sha'ban Ja'fari. Regarding these events and the involvement of Sha'ban Bimokh in them, see Homa Sarshar, *Sha'ban Ja'fari* (Beverly Hills, CA: NAAB Publishers, 2002).

[52]Quoted in Anahid Ojakiyans, "[Naqd-e] *Tehran, Shahr-e bi Aseman*," *Nameh-ye Farhangestan*, no. 6 (Summer 2005): 164–72.

[53]Ojakiyans, "*Tehran, Shahr-e bi Aseman*," 170.

In contrast to the novels of Parsipur and Cheheltan, genuine nostalgia characterizes Goli Taraqqi's autobiographical stories in *Khaterehha-ye Parakandeh* (*Scattered Memories*).[54] In the first story in the collection, "Otobus-e Shemiran" ("The Shemiran Bus"), we find the narrator and her little daughter waiting on a snowy day in Paris for a bus to go to school. The snow reminds the narrator of the Tehran of her own childhood. She recalls:

> I am put in mind of Tehran in winter, dominated by the tall, snow-clad Alborz peak underneath the turquoise-blue skies, the bare, sleeping trees in the far end of our garden, dreaming of the return of migrating birds.
> In my childhood, snowy days had no end [. . .] Saturday, Sunday, Monday. I counted the days [. . .] Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and the snow continued to fall. Ten centimeters, twenty centimeters, half a meter, to the point that snow would block doors and the school would close for a whole week.[55]

And then, "What a joy!" she adds. But her expression of joy now as an adult is not merely because school was closed; it is incited by her memories of old Tehran—north Tehran.

In another story, "Khaneh-ye Madar Bozorg" ("Grandma's House"), one day when the narrator's mother and other female relatives take her shopping in the city, despite the heavy traffic, crowded buses, and her mother and aunts being accosted with catcalls and pinched by hooligans on the streets, she writes:

> Personally, I just love Istanbul Avenue. The odor of fish and the aroma of coffee and roasted nuts and seeds [and European perfumes and powders] blend in my nostrils, making me feel steeped in languor and drowsiness [and make my body flex in joy]. I imagine myself a grown-up woman and the object of desire of all men around me. I fantasize that I have an interminable supply of money, that I am able

[54]Goli Taraqqi, *Khaterehha-ye Parakandeh* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Bagh-e Ayeneh, 1994).
[55]Goli Taraqqi, "The Shemiran Bus," in *A Mansion in the Sky: Short Stories by Goli Taraghi*, trans. Faridoun Farrokh (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2003), 9–22. Quote on p. 9.

to buy all the fruit loops and cream puffs my heart desires, that I can go to see [the film] "Bathing Beauties" a hundred times.[56]

Unlike Taraqqi's nostalgic remembrances of old Tehran, Ghazaleh Alizadeh's 1999 novel, *Shabha-ye Tehran* (*The Nights of Tehran*), the time frame of which is also before the Islamic Revolution, in the 1960s and 1970s, is a sardonic look at the past.[57] Much of the story, which revolves around the lives of a group of young, educated, and idealistic characters from the upper classes, occurs in aristocratic parties and gatherings in north Tehran's luxurious homes and gardens; but a significant portion of the novel is also devoted to detailed descriptions of the doom and gloom of south Tehran and its inhabitants.

With a large cast of characters, this six-hundred-page novel begins with the return of Behzad, a young man in his early twenties who has spent his childhood and school years in France studying painting, and his introduction to Tehran's "high society" by his extremely wealthy, frail grandmother. Early in the novel, Behzad becomes acquainted with a retired colonel's daughter and son, Nastaran and Farzin, and in turn, Farzin introduces him to his friends, whom he refers to as the "savages." Rebellious and idealistic, the "savages" represent a generation of young Iranians who want to change the world, some with subversive political activism and others through their poetry or art.

For the first nearly three hundred pages of the novel, Tehran appears to consist of merely north Tehran, which is usually represented by the gatherings of the fashionably dressed members of high society in large aristocratic homes and lush gardens full of flowers and trees. Mentions of south Tehran in this part of the novel are usually in passing, without any detailed description. One such occasion occurs in a club which Behzad's friends have opened and for which they have had a nineteenth-century Qajar-era house completely renovated and furnished. South Tehran is

[56]Goli Taraqqi, "Grandma's House," in *A Mansion in the Sky: Short Stories by Goli Taraghi*, trans. Faridoun Farrokh (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2003), 39–58. Quote on p. 49.

[57]Ghazaleh Alizadeh, *Shabha-ye Tehran* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Tus, 1999). An English translation of this novel by M.R. Ghanoonparvar will be available through Mazda Publishers in 2020.

mentioned in a brief conversation between Behzad and Abolala, his impeccably dressed friend who is a Western-educated architect:

> "The place turned out to be very attractive. We looked around a lot to find a house like this."
> Behzad slowly placed the ashtray on the mantelpiece. He got up and stood in front of the fire:
> "I never thought houses like this still existed in Tehran. Every generation of our people destroys everything from the previous generation."
> "In the southern part of the city, yes, there are a lot of old houses. But in these neighborhoods, they keep demolishing them and replacing them with those donkey phalluses."
> Behzad laughed:
> "Maybe this is precisely why Tehran is a faceless ugly city."[58]

Although south Tehran is almost totally absent in the first half of *Shabha-ye Tehran*, it is represented vividly in the second. The novel contrasts the parlors and gardens of affluent north Tehran with the squalor and poverty in the streets, alleyways, and flophouses of south Tehran. It also juxtaposes the genteel behavior and dialogue in the first part of the novel, about art and other "sophisticated" topics, with the rudeness and vulgar language in some episodes of the second part. This contrast and juxtaposition present an ambivalent picture of Tehran as a megalopolis that, like many other such cities throughout the world, is moving in opposite directions: north Tehran, toward a modern society with all the amenities that the twentieth century offers, and south Tehran, toward death and destruction. To fully introduce south Tehran to the reader, Alizadeh refocuses her narrative on the subversive, underground political activities of several members of the "savages," including Farzin, who has disavowed his parents' social class and claims that he has become a member of the working class by choice.[59] His disappearance triggers a search for him in south

[58]Alizadeh, *Shabha-ye Tehran*, 80.

[59]Alizadeh, *Shabha-ye Tehran*, 398.

Tehran by his sister, Nastaran, with the help of an older member of the "savages," Akbar Shirzad, one of the strangest characters in the novel and a self-proclaimed social philosopher. The cultural difference between north and south Tehran requires Nastaran to cover herself in a chador. After a long drive in the crowded section of the city that links the two parts of Tehran, they find themselves in an alleyway in one of the south Tehran neighborhoods: "A gutter passed through the alleyway that emitted a foul stench. Rotten leaves, empty cans, and broken glass moved through it noisily in the slimy black water. The brick walls were high, occasionally a cluster of ivy hanging from the edge. The scent of black locust and jasmine mingled with the odor of hot oil, boiled meat, and green vegetable stew. Children were playing, chasing one another, their heads shaved, grubby pacifiers hanging from their necks."[60]

In search of Farzin, they visit several flophouses, mostly occupied by the homeless or people from the provinces. Nastaran becomes nauseous and vomits in one of them from the stench and filth, and in another

> they entered a long dark hallway. The door to the room was open, and in it disheveled people with greasy dark faces were lying down or sitting in a row on metal beds. Old dying men with drifting, glassy unfocused eyes as narrow as those of roosters, mouths half open, black and toothless, large heads covered with soft white fuzz resembling newly-hatched chicks, the smell of sweat, dampness, and ammonia wafting in the hallway. They entered the room. Akbar looked at the beds and tattered clothes scattered around the brick floor. The air was unbreathable.[61]

Shabha-ye Tehran, with its gloomy themes, is the story of a lost generation, but it is also the story of Tehran; hence, the title can be a metaphor for Tehran in the years referred to as the "Age of Night," the years that led to the events of the ensuing decade.[62]

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[60]Alizadeh, *Shabha-ye Tehran*, 453.

[61]Alizadeh, *Shabha-ye Tehran*, 460.

[62]See Reza Baraheni, "Qessehnevisi dar Asr-e Shab," in *Qessehnevisi* (Tehran: Ashrafi, 1969–70), 75–132.

Nostalgia for and yearning to return to Tehran, where he has lived almost all his life, is what Bahman Esfandiyar feels, as a seventy-year-old former general in the shah's army who had fled Iran following a brief period of incarceration by the new regime, shortly after the Islamic Revolution. Ja'far Modarres-Sadeqi's novel *Ab-o Khak* (*Homeland*) begins with the general's return to Tehran at Mehrabad Airport, where he intends to go down on his knees to kiss the ground of his native city.[63] His plan, however, fails, because he is hastened along with the crowd of other passengers onto a bus and on to the terminal by the Revolutionary Guards for passport and security inspections. He has left behind his wife and children, who are now grown-up and married, in Irvine, California, hoping to spend the rest of his days in Tehran. He expects to be met at the airport by the wife and two daughters of his former boss and long-time friend, another general, who was executed after the revolution. This plan also fails, however, as the authorities confiscate his passport. A week later, having gone several times to an address that was given to him to retrieve his passport, he is told repeatedly that he needs to return the following day or the next week. He is frustrated: "Going after his passport was one of the things he had to do, twice a week; and in addition to going after his passport, he had to go to many places. Finding each of these in a city so crowded, after all these years of not having been in this city, and all these new names and two-way streets that had been made into one-way streets, was not an easy task."[64]

Eventually, however, despite the fact that he can hardly recognize Tehran any more, he attempts to become accustomed to the city and its new ways. At the same time, an old love affair with his former friend's wife, Minu, is rekindled, which becomes even more of an incentive for him to stay. However, after months of trying to cope, and following an unpleasant encounter with the security officials, his frustration intensifies. Tehran, the city every "alley and back alley of which he knew so well," has totally changed. It is no longer the hometown he yearned for a few months earlier:

[63]Ja'far Modarres-Sadeqi, *Ab-o Khak* (Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 2005).
[64]Modarres-Sadeqi, *Ab-o Khak*, 53.

> The streets had no sidewalks. At one time, all the streets of Tehran were two-way streets. At one time, all the streets of Tehran had sidewalks, and all these noisy, annoying motorcycles didn't weave in and out between the cars. He did not wish to live in a city so stinky, so crowded, so ugly, and so filthy! A city full of cars and motorcycles honking their horns all at once, and those in the cars and the pedestrians constantly yelling at each other and fighting. The shouting of the traffic officer from the loudspeaker of the police car was louder than the other noises, and he would yell at the drivers and even curse offensively. The sidewalks were full of spit. Everyone spat wherever he wanted and no one cared. He saw some people blowing their noses and wiping their snotty hands on the trees by the sidewalk, on the wall, or on the backs of their own pants. All this insistence on spitting seemed strange to him; it was a new custom. He could not remember whether the Iranian people twenty-some years ago were so excessively fond of spitting, or not.[65]

Moniru Ravanipur's "Tehran" is also a nostalgic story, but with a twist.[66] The narrator is a woman who, in her younger days during the Islamic Revolution, was a political activist and who has now returned to Tehran. The story opens with her wondering: "Is this the same avenue once called Mossadegh? And what are these department stores, with such elaborately designed windows and red-carpeted floors[?] Are they the same shops you used to run past like a flash of light in early dawn, with [a] stack of leaflets under your arms, to slip them under their doors?"[67] She visits a few of these luxury stores, one of which is so exclusive that she has to ring the bell to be let in, and then she wonders: "No, this kind of luxury store was not here in those days. How long ago were "those days" anyway? When did these stores and these tower-like, high-rise buildings appear in this place, you wonder. And this small park? It was not here in those days, or was it?"[68]

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[65]Modarres-Sadeqi, *Ab-o Khak*, 150.

[66]Moniru Ravanipur, "Tehran 2006," *Zanan* 136 (AH 1385/AD 2006): 76–79.

[67]Moniru Ravanipur, "Tehran," in *The Shipwrecked: Contemporary Stories by Women from Iran*, ed. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone, trans. Faridoun Farrokh (New York: The Feminist Press, 2014), 195–205. Quote on p. 195.

[68]Ravanipur, "Tehran," 198.

Walking toward the park to rest on a bench near the playground, where children are frolicking, she comments on her legs being unable to easily carry her fifty-year-old, "barrel-like" figure, when she is intercepted by a shabbily dressed young man who appears to be complimenting her on her figure or dress. When she smiles in return, a young, attractive woman sitting on another bench warns her that the man is a member of a gang of purse snatchers and that she should take out her cell phone and pretend to dial the police. After a friendly chat with the young woman, the narrator walks to a nearby store to buy a couple of sodas for them. When she returns with the sodas, the woman has vanished, and so have the contents of the narrator's purse, including her cell phone, wallet, and ID. The story ends with, "You have been robbed."[69]

In contrast to the Tehran portrayed in *Ab-o Khak*, whose protagonist's dreams of returning to and living in "his own" city are shattered by the crowded streets packed with cars and motorcycles, sidewalks full of spit, and mistreatment at the hands of officials, the picture of Tehran presented by Ravanipur's narrator reveals a more tranquil city: one with luxury stores, high-rises, and quiet parks—in other words, a modern city associated in the reader's mind with a place perhaps somewhere in Europe. However, this portrayal of Tehran is even more negative, since it shows a city concealing the hands that rob those extended in friendship.

The wish or prediction of the poetic persona of Esma'il Kho'i's poem cited at the beginning of this article was seemingly about to be fulfilled a decade later with the Islamic Revolution, which was hailed by its leaders and supporters as the "revolution of the downtrodden." Like the "rain" in Kho'i's poem, this revolution was supposed to eliminate the inequality and injustice that separated the "famished people" of south Tehran, who dwelled in the "valleys," from the affluent in north Tehran, at the "peak." Prior to this revolution, those in "modernized" or "Westernized" north Tehran were viewed as being in control of the capital city as well as the rest of the country, and they bore the blame for the poverty and misery of underdeveloped south Tehran.

[69]Ravanipur, "Tehran," 204.

As Tehran has undergone many social and political changes in the course of more than a century, its portrayal in Persian fiction has also changed. Although the overall picture of the city in these tales changes in some respects, in others it remains the same. While issues such as prostitution and moral corruption in the capital city seem to be a main concern in the works of pre–World War II writers such as Moshfeq-Kazemi, Dashti, Hejazi, and Mas'ud, post–World War II writers such as Chubak, Al-e Ahmad, Golestan, Ebrahimi, Rahbar, and Sa'edi focus their attention on the downtrodden represented by south Tehran; in general, their portrayal of such characters is a sympathetic one. In post–Islamic Revolution fiction, while the work of a writer such as Taraqqi reflects a nostalgic look back at the city of her childhood, stories by writers such as Parsipur, Cheheltan, and Alizadeh, with theirretrospective look at Tehran, mainly deal with individuals and their efforts to cope with life in the megacity. On the other hand, Tehran as it appears in the works of other writers such as Amirshahi, Modarres-Sadeqi, and Ravanipur continues to be a city in which the gap between south and north has widened or become more evident, not only in social and economic terms, but also culturally. This gap can be seen in several stories in Goli Taraqqi's *Khaterehha-ye Parakandeh*; but the gap is even more visible in Mahshid Amirshahi's *Dar Hazar*, in which the narrator offers the readers a far more negative picture of Tehran, one in which the south has finally overtaken the north:

> Beggars and stray dogs, and Arabs in headscarves and head ropes, and men who are carrying bloody carcasses of sheep or calves on their shoulders and necks are permanent spectacles on all streets. While I am waiting on Abbasabad Street for a taxi, I see each one of the four groups marching in front of me.
>
> The Arabs pass followed by stray dogs, but the beggars stick to you like ticks and only go away to grab another passerby or someone else waiting when you shout at them and threaten them. The goods that they all initially offer you in exchange for alms consist of a series of prayers mournfully chanted for your living and dead relatives. Some of them, in addition to these goods, display a sick

child or a deformed arm or leg to increase the amount of your charitable donation. When they lose hope of receiving any money, once again, they get your living and dead relatives involved—this time with sarcasm, insults, and cursing that completely erases the effect of the prayers. These days, you cannot pray for anyone free of charge.

When an orange taxi stops in front of me, I try to free my sleeve from the obstinate claws of a dark-complexioned woman who has tattoos between her eyebrows and on her chin. The woman starts cursing me, and I say to the driver, "Shah Reza Street."[70]

To the narrator of Amirshahi's novel, Tehran is a city in which the "rain" has leveled the "peaks" and "valleys," a city that is now, in her view, under the control of the former inhabitants of south Tehran.

[70]Amirshahi, *Dar Hazar*, 306.