Return to the Father’s Land:
An Iranian Memoir\(^1\)

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Tara Bahrampour’s *To See and See Again. A Life in Iran and America*\(^2\) is an unusual memoir for the author’s generation. It has a tone of emotional authenticity not always found in memoirs, and it is this tone that encouraged the discussion that follows.

There are numerous memoirs written in the English language by Iranian women and by now we have two generations of memoirists. Memoirs by Iranian women, especially young women, have gained recognition in reviews and interviews beyond the Iranian environment. But there have been relatively few scholarly studies of Iranian diaspora memoirs. Those that are

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available at this point in time tend to theorize the memoir as a construction of a new space in which to create a sense of belonging. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas of unhomeliness and hybridity have influenced the theoretical discussion of the Iranian memoir.3

According to Madelaine Hron, the author of Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture (University of Toronto Press, 2009), whose text I found especially pertinent to developing this paper, current tendencies in literary theory privilege concepts such as ethnic performance, resistance, hybridity, mobility, or multiculturalism.4 In Hron’s view, Bhabha’s concept of hybridity celebrates the joyous power of the signifier, but glosses over the fact that hybridity often derives from “contexts of great suffering.”5

While broadening the discussion in one respect, such notions as hybridity, and multiculturalism limit the scholarly discussion of literature by immigrants by placing to the side the realities of contemporary global migration and the difficulties of immigrants. In the academic world, and in volunteer training centres too, terms such as multiculturalism, pluralism and hybridity are the terms (which Hron labels “circulating currency”).6 used to indicate cultural differences and successful integration. Hron’s work as a volunteer in a program to help acculturate immigrants to life in Canada brought her face to face with the feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and confusion of the newcomer to a strange and unfamiliar country. She met with immigrants from different places who longed to reveal a hidden story of sadness, which she came to understand as the pain of the immigrant.7 Hron points out that in our time, the immigrant (including the exile) is not exceptional but rather an increasingly common and complex fixture of the global world.8

3 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
4 Madelaine Hron, Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 16.
5 Hron, Translating Pain, 149.
6 Hron, Translating Pain, x.
7 Hron, Translating Pain, ix–x.
8 Hron, Translating Pain, 6.
Taking my lead from Hron’s interest in the pain engendered by immigration (and her intention to draw scholarly attention to the sufferings of immigration in contemporary art and culture), I suggest that by focusing on the emotional difficulty of immigration, not only do we give recognition to the reality of the immigrant situation; but we open up the Iranian community for a discussion of an experience shared by many others.

As I see it, the existing theoretical discussion particularizes and isolates the Iranian experience and places it outside the shared majority experience of people in our time. In the modern age, few of us remain in the world of our childhood. Feelings of nostalgia for the past are part of our common heritage. To an extent we are all in an immigrant situation in that we share the immigrant’s sense of being disconnected from our roots. Of course, it goes without saying that the challenges faced in the process of emigrating from a homeland to a host country are unique; but in our global, modern age, we can share this experience, at least to some extent, and appreciate it.

In Hron’s study of immigrant suffering in literature and culture, the author speaks about the concealed sadness and suffering of immigrants and the profound feelings that lie beneath the surface of their writing: “Immigration involves many losses, including the loss of home, familiar food, native music, accepted social customs, maternal language, childhood surroundings, and loved ones. Immigrants mourn for these objects of loss, and they grieve lost aspects of their old selves. Sometimes this mourning is incomplete, leading to depression.” The immigrant’s biggest threat is assimilation, “the loss of one’s cultural identity and social and historical roots.”

The challenges faced by the children of immigrants are as compelling in their own way as the experiences of first generation immigrants. Tara Bahrampour’s *To See and See Again* is the story of two generations. While

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it is written from the perspective of the young author, it is both her story and the story of her parents (her mother is an American, her father is Iranian). It is the story of her relationship with her parents and, in particular, it is the story of her bond with her Iranian father.

Bahrampour fits Hron’s template of the immigrant. Born in 1968, she was eleven years old when she left Iran in 1979. She misses her home. She misses her homeland. She mourns her childhood in Iran which came to an abrupt end. But she writes the word ‘loss’ only once and this is at the end of her memoir. She does not admit to sadness. Yet her memoir is suffused with loss and sadness.

While I use the word immigrant to describe Tara and categorize her memoir as immigrant literature, she does not identify herself as an immigrant. She uses this term only once and this is in the concluding pages of her memoir where she compares an expat to an immigrant. She is in New York and has arranged to meet a school pal, Clara, from the Community School which she attended in Iran. Clara refers to herself as an expat and this causes Tara to reflect on the terminology for those who live away from home.

The word [expat] evokes aloof, wealthy outsiders...people to whom the place they live in remains foreign no matter how long they stay. It is the opposite of “immigrant,” which implies large families crammed into small apartments, perhaps not legal, hampered by their foreign accents and their dark skin (expat skin is simply pink and peeling from the sun). Immigrants miss their own country—maybe they didn’t want to leave it in the first place: expats love the adventure of being away. “Expat” can always go home again. “Immigrant” is close to “refugee.”

In Iran, Tara’s family were not expats. Iran was their home. “And yet,” Tara tells us, “When we finally left, we were not immigrants to America either.

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12Bahrampour, To See and See Again, 354.
Three of us had been born there (her mother, and two of the three children); four of us spoke perfect American English. Landing in America we went straight to Grandma and Grandpa’s backyard swimming pool in the hills.13 But neither did the family totally belong in America. “We had a sense of being untethered in the world…With no model to follow, we could imagine ourselves anywhere in the world.”14

Notwithstanding Tara’s disinclination to place herself in the category of an immigrant, I hope she will forgive me if I discuss her memoir as immigrant fiction. To See and See Again is a perplexing piece of writing. On the one hand, it is informative about the life of Tara and her family both in America and in Iran. In this sense, it is factual. But it is a literary work, a work of the creative imagination.15 It does what literature does most compellingly: it tells us about people; it elucidates the human experience. To See and See Again reveals family relationships in a time of trouble. And especially poignant is the portrait Tara paints of her Iranian father.

To my mind, the most touching passages of this memoir are those that deal with Tara’s complicated attachment to her father. Immigration, as Hron’s study continually points out, is a cumulative series of traumatic events resulting from the process of changing homes. Immigration is a story of profound cultural differences in the host country. Immigration inevitably involves loss.16 Immigrants mourn not only their past life but they also grieve for their former selves. People who leave home, the study points out, no matter what they label themselves or are labelled, exile, or émigré, or immigrant, all experience an uncomfortable split between past and present and between home and host country. But for a complexity of reasons the

13Bahrampour, To See and See Again, 355.
14Bahrampour, To See and See Again.
15Hron, Translating Pain, 192, cites the dominant theme of returning home in writers of Iranian immigrant fiction such as Satrapi, Rachlin, Bahrampour, and Moaveni. She tells us that, for these Iranian writers, return to the homeland is a dominant theme in the same way as returning home is a common trope in contemporary immigrant literature.
16Hron, Translating Pain. 27.
immigrant is not always willing or even able to express the range of deep emotions engendered by immigration. Tara’s father is the family member who most closely resembles the description of the silent immigrant found in Translating Pain’s chapter “‘Painless’ Fictions?” on Czech immigrants. Tara’s memoir is not only her story but the story of her father. It is Tara who gives voice to her father’s unspoken grief.

I was both surprised and encouraged to find that Tara’s parents resemble the situation of the Czechoslovakian émigrés who are one of the three groups of immigrants featured in Translating Pain.¹⁷ Czechs left their home country in large numbers (some half a million people) after 1948 to escape political circumstances forced upon them. In the case of Tara’s father and mother, were it not for events far beyond their control, it is highly unlikely they would have emigrated from Iran to the United States. They had no reason to leave Iran, and they had every reason to stay.

Translating Pain does not address the literature of Iranians specifically. But there is a similarity between Iranian diaspora literature and Czech exile literature in the avoidance of speaking about the hardships of immigration. Czech writers use ‘silent’ rhetorics of pain such as avoidance, allusion, and distancing. If aspects of the experience of immigration are addressed in Tara’s memoir, it is usually in an indirect manner to highlight contrasts between America and home in Iran.

Although Tara was born in Los Angeles, her family returned to Iran when she was a young child. She was familiar with both societies, growing up in Tehran and accompanying her mother on her frequent trips back to America. In Iran, Tara’s mother settled into the life of her husband’s family. Tara’s mother liked Iran. She was not one to worry unduly about whether she belonged in Iran or America. She was a musician and returned

¹⁷Hron examines Maghrebi and Haitian immigrant texts and Czech literature in the chapter “‘Painless’ Fictions?”
to Los Angeles to record songs. Her Iranian relatives knew that she worked with male musicians and studio executives. But they respected her and considered her acceptably modest.\textsuperscript{18} Her mother took things as they came. She was given a Persian name and became Muslim at the insistence of her father-in-law who wanted his grandchildren to be Muslims. Her mother’s identity seems to be more of a problem for Tara than for her mother. Tara makes sure that the servants in the family’s village home know that her mother is not originally Muslim and that her Persian name is not her real name. Tara tells them she is not Muslim. There are some cultural misunderstandings. But the family rides over the bumps. Her mother’s position in the family and in society is assured by virtue of having a husband and children. Tara’s father is setting up a new office with three other architects. He has ambitious plans for the family to move to a comfortable home he is designing in an upcoming suburb of Tehran. Tara and her brother and sister are becoming more fluent in Persian. Their cousins speak English effortlessly. They all play together nicely.

The future is bright for Tara’s family. But gunshots disturb the peace from time to time. The university does not open on schedule. Tara’s Community School closes and then opens and then closes. One by one, stores, cinemas, and restaurants shut down.

Threatened by events leading up to the 1979 Revolution, the family left Iran. The leaving was abrupt. The exit was tumultuous and calamitous for Tara. In her words: “On the day we left Iran, I did not know this would be the last week of things the way we knew them.”\textsuperscript{19} Her mother left first with the children. Before getting on the plane to leave Iran for the journey to the United States, eleven-year old Tara looked back and fully realized she was leaving home: “It was in trouble and I was leaving it.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18}Bahrampour, \textit{To See and See Again}, 54. \hfill \textsuperscript{19}Bahrampour, \textit{To See and See Again}, 115. \hfill \textsuperscript{20}Bahrampour, \textit{To See and See Again}, 116.
Tara’s father stayed behind to settle his affairs. Three days later, one day before the Shah left Iran and the airport closed, her father took a plane out of Iran.

In a 1981 article “The Immigrant Novel as Genre” (which Hron terms “the canonical formulation of the immigrant novel” but makes clear that it deals mainly with Western immigrant narratives),21 the character of the immigrant is typically a member of a foreign ethnicity, portrayed as naïve, ignorant of American life, held back by a language barrier, and culturally and socially unassimilated. The immigrant prototype undertakes an odyssey of social and cultural adjustment in the host country. The conventions of the immigrant narrative take immigrants on a journey, conceived of as an educational journey that ultimately, in spite of trials and tribulations, leads to successful assimilation into a new society. Although the particulars of the immigrant journey may vary, Hron makes the point that inevitably a displaced person suffers loss. Loss is a universal constant. Leaving home is painful. Home is where an individual’s identity is rooted; home is the source of personal stories.

Home for Tara is Iran. Throughout the memoir she expresses the wish to be back in Iran, “back in a household of Iranian relatives...As long as I sat with them, drinking tea and playing backgammon, I would be protected—in full view of everyone, and safe from the world.”22 As a child growing up in Iran, Tara was surrounded by a loving family. In the stories her father told her, Iran was a land of fairy tales and heroes, where good always triumphs over evil. Tara’s life in Tehran was comfortable and filled with friends and activities. She was a happy child; her father was a happy man. Together they visited the village where her father grew up. “The way Baba told it, nothing in the world today could ever be as good as those early days” (14). The youngest child in the family, her father was “adored and indulged”(16). Her


22 Bahrampour, To See and See Again, 174.

Hereafter cited by page number in the paragraphs.
father is deeply rooted in Iran. Tara does not, and she cannot, have the same sense as her father of belonging to the land.

But neither does Tara feel a sense of belonging in America. In America, she dresses like other girls, and behaves like other girls. But she tells us that she is not and never will be thoroughly American. Although she feels half-American and half-Iranian, “people are always trying to make me one thing or another” (61). As Tara settles into life in America, in Portland Oregon, she misses Iran. She compares America and Iran and America is invariably on the losing side of the equation. When she visits a café in Los Angeles that tries to be Iranian, she compares it to its equivalent in Iran: “I know that this café is not like the real Iran. In the real Iran this would be a pastry shop, and a scruffy-faced man in a blue tunic would shovel fresh raisin cookies into a box and let Sufi [her sister] put her finger in the knot of the string where he tied it” (150).

Tara holds on tightly to memories of Iran. There is nothing to disturb her idyllic picture of a happy childhood in her father’s world. Her parents never discuss their past life. Only at the end of the memoir and many years after the family had moved from Iran to America, does Tara tell us about her parents’ true feelings. Both stories involve unpleasant memories which her parents have never revealed. Her mother shielded Tara from the truth of why, prior to their final move to America, the family left Tehran to move to her father’s boyhood village. There had been a threat against her father’s life. “For a year or two after finding these things out I would break into tears when I read stories about lost fathers; sometimes when Baba was just going to work, I would get scared that he might not come home, that something might still happen to him while he was apart from us” (115). This memory frightens Tara, but another incident which had been kept from Tara disturbs her even more deeply. “Years later Mama told me that when he arrived in Los Angeles, on that first night, Baba had cried [bitterly] for all he had left behind” (117). Tara tells us her father never cried again.
In these and other glimpses Tara provides of her father, we meet a figure much diminished in his new setting. Her father was something of a hippie, free, and carefree. On his first visit to the United States, he came to study and to enjoy himself with no plans to stay. He met Tara’s mother, they enjoyed each other’s company, and they married to live happily ever after. But as the memoir progresses, Tara’s father fades into the shadows of the memoir, no longer the vibrant, happy, hopeful person he once was.

Tara’s father had the prospect of a promising career and a comfortable life in the years just prior to the 1979 Revolution. The clearest symbol of the hope he had for himself and his family is the home he had plans to build in Shahrak-e Gharb, which in 1978 was a newly developing suburb in the north of Tehran, far from the tumult of the central city. He is unable to translate his profession as an architect into a professional job in America. He interviews at a few architects’ offices and finally finds a job as a draftsman. Tara’s handsome, smiling father, who used to take her on outings to interesting places in Iran, is transformed into a disappointed man, and an irritable father. Tara loses patience with this man. She yells at him and they do not speak. “As far as I can see, if we do not fit into this life, our Iranian father is the one to blame” (137). A Persian bookstore in Los Angeles becomes her father’s surrogate home. He spends hours in the bookstore, talking to the men behind the counter and buying books.

The beginning of their stay in America is a time of demoralization and disorientation for Tara’s family. They all desperately wish the world would change in Iran and they could go home. In the beginning, her father moves the family from place to place as if he does not want to admit that he is in America to stay. Sometimes Tara’s father “just sits there and looks tired, the way he did when we picked him up at the L.A. airport last January” (135). Tara senses her once vibrant father is running out of energy from the strain of the journey. “I knew that since we had left Iran something in him had become fragile. And I knew that people could be mean to him; I knew this
because I had been mean myself” (156). Tara is afraid to let her father out of her sight because he might not be able to look after himself “without us to translate for him” (156). She misses what the family left behind in the rush to leave. Her father “usually does not talk about what we have lost” (152).

**Tara’s Return to Iran**

Tara is afraid of forgetting Iran. She delights in telling her classmates stories of Iran, “desperate to save myself from forgetting” (125). It is about halfway through the memoir that Tara openly tells the reader, “I miss my life there” (140). “When I look back on how we spent three whole months on this boring little street [in Portland, Oregon] when we could have been living our old life in Iran, it all seems like a thoughtless mistake” (150).

Tara is routinely disappointed in the homes her parents find for the family in America. She never manages to feel at home. The news from Iran is troubling. The hostage crisis affects Tara as it does other Iranians in America. But the biggest crisis for Tara, is when her friend Shahrzad, a schoolmate from Community School in Tehran, writes to tell Tara that she is changing her name to identify herself as a Catholic Italian. “This letter is like a slap in the face. Shahrzad…the only friend who understood how much I missed Community School—has slipped from Iranian to Italian like the misreading of some alphabetical list. …How can you claim you miss Iran when you do this?” Tara has lost a friend with whom to remember Iran. She considers it an unforgivable sin to lie about who you are. She thinks it is better to simply keep quiet (133–34).

The article “The Immigrant Novel as Genre,” suggests that in the mind of the immigrant, the old world becomes an idealized reality. So it is that Tara’s memories of Iran undergo a change. One indication of this process in Tara’s case is that she begins to venerate her Iranian relatives. Personal memories of visits with her father to the family village mutate into thoughts of the strong women and men of her father’s family. She compares her Iranian relatives
who are secure in their world with the weakened family she experiences in America. Tara is in exile from the family circle that offered her protection for the last time before the flight from Iran inserted her into a world of confusion and dislocation and trauma and sadness.

On page 159, of her book of 361 pages, Tara plants the idea in the reader’s mind that she may return to Iran. She is a teenager chatting with her young friends. They all dream of leaving home as young people do. Tara floats the idea of going back to Iran. In response to a friend’s look of alarm, Tara reassures her: “It’s not as bad as you think…I could just stay with my grandmother. It would be fine” (159).

The theme of fear of forgetting Iran, the fear of losing Iran, resurfaces some years later; as she explains to us: “In Iran your place becomes empty when you leave and stays empty as long as you are away. But what if the one who leaves forgets about his empty place? What if, by living so long in America or England or France, he starts to become part of those countries and no longer remembers his original home?” (194).

Not everyone is afraid of forgetting. Tara’s uncle Parviz is an American success story compared to most of Tara’s relatives. He is a professor and his wife is a scientist. Tara describes his children who went off to college “leaving behind bedroom shelves stacked with prom pictures and sports trophies.” Except for a few Shirazi picture frames, their house does not “feel Iranian” to Tara. There are bagels for breakfast and a pet dog in the living room. “We’re American now,” Parviz said, his slow Southern drawl only slightly tinged with foreignness. “This is the best country in the world” (195).

But Tara is not like Parviz. She does not want to forget Iran. She is afraid to forget Iran. Her parents have not helped her to remember. The memoir itself strongly implies that her fear of forgetting can be traced to her parents’ silence about the past. When success was just around the corner for them,
the revolution began. While they believed for just a little too long that life would return to normal, and that they could pick up where they left off once things settled down, they were forced to face the impossibility of their hopes and fled. In America, they made choices that from Tara’s perspective were ill advised, almost as if they were punishing themselves for making wrong choices during the years they lived in Iran. Her parents, as Tara sees them, live with disappointment. But they keep their regrets to themselves. She cannot share their disappointment. They will not share her sadness. Tara and her parents do not share a past.

As Tara relaxes about who she is and where she belongs in America, her relationship with her father calms down. The family begins to settle into a new life. Tara is no longer embarrassed about her father being Iranian. The family socializes with Iranians and Tara feels comfortable in the Persian community. She discovers she likes Persian food. She says she is finding a side of herself that her family lost. Her Iranian grandmother, who comes to visit, is a link in the Iranian bracelet. Tara realizes she has been waiting for six and a half years for her grandmother’s kiss. Her grandmother brings with her from Iran Tara’s father’s neckties. Tara wishes she could see all the things that were left behind in their closets. She wants to learn more about Iran, and wishes there were people around who could teach her “beyond what Baba taught me of Iran” (184).

A cousin is going back to Iran. He speaks of waking up in his father’s village and seeing snow on the mountains and hearing the rooster crow. “Whenever my relatives talk about Iran they reminisce about a life of horses and rivers and mountains, a life in which it was never necessary to get up and go to work in the morning. Baba really did have that kind of childhood” (181).

The desire to return to Iran is a constant strand in Tara’s memoir. But as her return becomes a reality and grows closer, Tara’s memories of Iran became more vivid and are more frequent. “I can smell the damp sea air, I can see
the hazy light filtering through the tall trees on the adjoining street and feel the bumpy dirt path under my bicycle wheels” (187). But she does realize that “what lies in Iran now is a world I have no idea how to imagine” (192). “Hardly any of us in America have gone back to see what the real Iran might be” (198). Only Tara’s oldest relatives go back and forth regularly. She discusses returning to Iran with her mother and father. Her father greets her news calmly. Her mother says with an unfamiliar bitterness in her voice: “What are you looking for? Your childhood? You can’t get that back” (201).

The return was not entirely Tara’s idea. Her father calls to say her cousin is being married in Iran and she should attend the wedding. “Baba is the one who is really from Iran. By buying a ticket and going there alone I feel I am usurping a right that belongs to him” (209). Tara returns to a city she left as a child fifteen years previously. She stays with relatives. She feels confined by their concern, but at the same time, warmed by their love. Her Iranian family knew her as a little girl. They remember her brother, they remember her mother and father. This moves her “in deeper ways than our different tastes and lifestyles” (292). At first, her Persian is not good enough to save her from getting into trouble; she has her American passport taken away at the Tehran airport. She is fearful of wearing something that will call attention to herself. But when her relatives hug her she “feels a rush of gladness to feel so connected” (223). She is American and Iranian once again, although her relatives consider her American: “She’s American…she needs to be alone sometimes” (235).

Tara’s relatives allow her to go out but beg her to be careful. She is feeling stronger because of her growing language skills and is braver each day. She wants to know what people think about the government that came after the Shah. She begins to know her way around. She visits the bazaar where someone asks her “where is your country.” She does not know how to answer this question, since “the life I once had here is gone” (255). She calls herself avazi, which she translates for us as out of whack, unnatural, switched. She
wonders: is she *switched*? Or has Iran *switched*? “Once we fit together; now I am always either straining to burst out or drowning in its largeness” (ibid.).

Tara seeks out the home her father was building when the family left Iran. She wants to see a place that is “a solid testament to our old life” (276). Her father’s dreams for a beautiful life in Tehran were encapsulated in his plans for a new home for the family in Sharak-e Gharb. She is invited in by the new owners. Although she never lived in this home, Tara feels she has returned home. She wanders through the rooms, which she calls “the world of my empty places” (251). She feels happy. But reality intrudes as it is bound to. The new way of life in Tehran, the way boys and girls socialize, and the *komitehs* are all features of present-day life in Iran. Tara does not actually say this but the reader senses that she finds life intolerably strange. There is not very much that she observes or very many people she meets that please her and make her feel comfortable; she is unable to feel at home.

When Tara does not find a photograph of herself in the 1979 Community School yearbook, the year the family left Iran, she is devastated. “My name was crossed off the roster…I did not find a trace of myself on those pages” (250). She is twenty-six and there is no documented proof that she once had a life in Iran. The return to Iran is what we might call a reality check. Tara allows herself, or perhaps it is more accurate to say she is compelled, to feel deeply and profoundly the loss that her family was never willing to speak about.

She does, however, have two experiences in Iran that satisfy her desire to feel a connection and a sense of belonging. She meets a film director and his wife, who is an actress. She finds them compatible. Their way of life matches Tara’s interests and sensibilities and would be the life she would choose if she were to return to Iran (290). She approves of their apartment with its Iranian tribal art and colourful woven horse blankets and musical instruments and brass pipes. In their company, she is conscious of a new regard for an older way of life. She visits mosques and shrines “without
worrying about seeming low class or backward” (292). She makes special mention of attending a *ta’azieh* performance where the women sympathize with each other and share “the burden of each other’s pain” and are able to “move beyond sorrow, toward something that is more like ecstasy” (294). But she cannot share the group’s catharsis and remains an outsider.

The most meaningful event of Tara’s return is her visit to the family home and the village which is so closely connected in her memory to her father. She stays in the home of her paternal uncle, her father’s oldest brother. In this section of the memoir there is an interesting change of voice; Tara lets the characters speak for themselves, in their own words and in their own style. Tara is not the intermediary, translating the experiences of others. She lets her female relatives choose what is important to them and to select the stories they want to tell. They talk about the marriages in the family. They recount the activities of their daily life, selecting events that are both ordinary and extraordinary. Tara contemplates staying in the village for at least a year, learning to conform to the slow pace of life and finding pleasure in the daily round of duties. She wants to find what she calls the village side of herself. She wants to be part of a life of sewing chadors, gathering roses, and waving rue to chase away the evil eye (323). She likes being embraced by the family and cocooned in its regard. Her paternal uncle is the last member of her family left in the village; all the others have scattered to the four winds of the earth. They may, but most likely will not, come back to visit. Tara finds it an unbearable thought that her uncle will sell the family home to strangers. The home of her father and his family is a precious part of Tara’s sense of family continuity. She is equally disturbed by the thought that the house could be left to crumble after the family is gone (340).

On her return to the United States, Tara thinks of how in Iran she felt she was in a place that protected her. Perhaps it was in fact home. She reads essays and short stories about first trips back to Iran and finds many expressions of displacement which are strongest in Iranians her own age. This is the
generation, she says, that was too young to make their own decisions about staying in Iran or leaving and who have “the most difficulty choosing their cultural allegiances” (348). The writings of Tara’s generation are filled with sincere, yet melodramatic, and poignant “expressions of nostalgia” (347); that ache for the past which Hron has highlighted as the constant and uncomfortable companion of immigration.

Tara wonders “how much of my perception of Iran was shaded by Mama and Baba’s presentation of it—both before the revolution and afterward, when Iran continued to be filtered to me through the eyes of adults” (203). Her father guarded his fond memories. Her mother hid her misgivings. Neither could give Tara a full picture (ibid.). She could not adopt or perhaps even relate to other people’s stories of Iran because, as she says more than once, each person has his or her own story, which belongs to that person alone. The only way for Tara to separate Iran from her memories of what it had been was to go back and see for herself, with the eyes of an adult.

In a 1999 work which Hron refers to, titled La Double Absence, the author, Algerian by birth, describes the immigrant as someone who remains psychically or subconsciously in the homeland and in the new host country, in other words, in both the past and the present. Dealing with this ambiguous state is the greatest challenge facing immigrants. Tara feels the anguish of suspension between two worlds, and at this particular juncture in her life, cannot step out of the in-between state.

Sitting in her apartment in New York with her friend Carla (the expat) and Carla’s mother, Carla’s mother reminds Tara that in Iran as a child she resisted Iran. “You were always comparing everything to America. For some reason

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23 Although this insight is almost tucked away and not highlighted, it is to my mind at the core of the family dynamics and is crucial to Tara’s and her generation’s palpable resentment and sense of displacement.


which I never quite understood, you identified with an American girlhood.” Tara remembers that she felt just as displaced in America.

Tara’s narrative of return illustrates compellingly the similarities between her experience and the experiences of immigrants from other places. Not in the details but rather in the feelings engendered by immigration. Tara and her family are under the same blanket, so to speak, as other immigrants. Especially, Tara experiences the feeling of being suspended ‘in-between,’ which is a sense of living in two worlds, or more accurately, between two worlds.

There is, however, an aspect of this memoir that may be specifically Iranian. While Tara takes centre stage as the author of this memoir, her father is its crucial character, virtually its lynchpin. When Tara left Iran with her mother and brother and sister, she said good-bye to her father. He promised her that he would see her again very soon. Tara believed him. Her father did follow the family to America. But she never saw the same man again.

Speaking with her friend Carla in New York after her return to America, Tara mentions Carla’s father and immediately regrets it. Carla’s father was killed in a robbery in a Mexican town. But Carla is able to speak about her father in the present tense as if he were still with her. This disturbs Tara and at the same time reassures her. She wonders if “that is how it is with loss—that you never really let go of the thing you are missing.”

Tara’s father returned once to Iran. But the trip did not make him happy and he never tried again. I would like to suggest that in this memoir, Tara has wrapped her loss and her father’s loss together as a gift for her father of their shared home and land. But there is another aspect of this memoir that has taken time to surface. Hron points out that while a rhetoric of denial, the repression of suffering may be chosen for a number of complex political

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26Bahrampour, To See and See Again, 356.
27Bahrampour, To See and See Again, 356.
or personal reasons, denial is inevitably accompanied by an element of impotence. However, “an effective rhetoric of pain,” may serve to augment the immigrant’s inner resources and lead to agency and even power in the public realm. By giving expression to her father’s unverbalized pain in this narrative of return, Tara is restoring her immigrant father to the fine figure of the man she remembers from her happy childhood.

29Hron, *Translating Pain*, 26