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In Search of the Abiding City

Iranian Female Writers' Narrative of Urban Space

Golrang Ranjbar

University of Bamberg Press

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Two novels that are discussed in this study have been translated into English: *Negaran nabash* and *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*. In this book, when the available English translation is used in the analysis, I will refer to it in the footnote by mentioning the translated English title. In the cases where I have entirely translated the passage to offer a more accurate translation for analytical purposes, I state the original Persian title of the novel. Accordingly, the entire excerpts from the two other novels, *Natamami* and *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, are my own translation.

This study follows a modified form of the transliteration scheme outlined by the Association for Iranian Studies. Consonants adhere to the guidelines of the system. The only difference is in the case of the long vowel aleph; while the Iranian Studies transliteration scheme suggests marking the vowel with *ā* macron, I marked the vowel with *a* in this book. The rest of the vowels, as well as ʿeyn and ʾhamzeh Unicode are based on the suggested scheme.

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Chapter I: Introduction

> I love our own Tehran, whatever it may be. I love it, and it is only there that my life finds a goal worth living for. I love that numbing sunshine and those heavy sunsets and those dusty alleyways and those miserable, wretched, vicious, and corrupt people.
>
> Forugh Farrokhzad, Iranian Poet & Film director [1]

As cities evolve to become the primary organizational system for where humans live, they are also growing increasingly difficult to understand, analyze, and predict. Among the many reasons for this complexity is their extremely multifaceted material reality, exemplified in high population density, congested streets, bustling neighborhoods, and all the boundless sounds and scenery that shape the façade of a city. Another reason is related to the intangible sides of a city—the underlying social, cultural and political interconnections that are continually forming and transforming the lives of people who live in urban environments. For precisely this reason, studying cities is particularly challenging and highly significant. While the effort to provide an all-encompassing theory to explain and manage a city's complex dynamics has remained problematic, as urban researchers are still engaged in sorting through the complexity of urban spaces, examining various forms of urban imagination, such as literary and visual representations of cities has become a major area of interest within many fields, including but not limited to cultural studies, sociology, literary criticism, and human geography.[2]

This study, accordingly, builds upon related work and is inspired by the scholarly fascination with fictional representations of urban space. Focusing on Tehran, the city where I grew up but only occasionally visited during the past ten years, the topic of the project was, to me, as personal as it was, to some extent, detached from my experience, given the sweeping changes of the city in recent years. Yet, the syntax of the quote above by Forugh Farrokhzad, upon which I stumbled one day, encapsulated and resonated with my hypothesis that was developed at the early stages of writing this study. Farrokhzad wrote these lines in a letter during her short-lived stay in Europe while promoting her documentary,

[1] This excerpt is part of a letter addressed to the poet's partner, Ebrahim Golestan. It was first published in Amir Esmaʿili and Abolqasem Sedarat's book about the renowned Iranian poet and filmmaker, Forugh Farrokhzad. This translation is, however, borrowed from Karim Emami's lecture delivered in Austin, Texas. See: Amir Esmaʿili and Abolqasem Sedarat, *Javedaneh Forugh Farrokhzad* (Tehran: Negah, 1993), 16; Karim Emami, "Recollections and Afterthoughts" (Austin: Texas, n.d.).

[2] For an extensive review of key developments in modern urban theory, see: Simon Parker, *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City*, Second edition (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

Khaneh siyah ast (House is Black). In this letter and in some others, that are published and accessible to the public, she constantly expresses her delight in benefiting from the wide variety of opportunities offered by a European urban environment, such as visiting museums and international cultural events. A yearning for Tehran, nevertheless, flows unabated within the lines of her letters. More curiously, however, the concluding part of the aforementioned quote stands in stark contrast to the gentle tone of the preceding sentences, which are laden with positive feelings and delicate sentiments about Tehran; the poet, in the last part, abruptly expresses her disgust and abomination for the city and directs her anger toward her fellow citizens in particular.

Farrokhzad is neither the topic of this study nor will her writing be studied here. What caught my attention, however, was that this paradox, longing for the city while simultaneously despising it for its essential characteristics, is also noticeable in the writing of the female novelists whose works I examine in this study. The Tehran that these authors experience has undergone drastic transformations since Farrokhzad penned her letter, not least an Islamic revolution. Yet, the city is still an ever-present theme in their writing and expresses the exact double nature to which Farrokhzad refers. By starting this book with this epigraph, I attempt to explore the why and the how of this ambivalent feeling towards the city by discussing different ways in which women writers have approached urban society in their work. In this respect, this study seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political aspects of present-day Iranian public spaces from a gendered perspective and as delineated through the authorial perspective of contemporary female writers.

The current study, it is important to note, only examines the narratives that take place, first and foremost, in the capital city of Tehran. This limitation is partly due to practical reasons, since a closer examination of the case studies with a similar setting was aligned with this study's objective and informed the discussions here with concrete and relevant examples. Another, and probably more important reason, is related to Tehran's political and cultural centralization; the city hosts the headquarters of the leading political organizations, foreign ministries, and financial institutions. Moreover, the prominent Iranian publishing houses have established their main offices in Tehran, and therefore, the majority of Iranian prose fiction in recent years takes place in Tehran, is published in Tehran, and is written by Tehran-based authors. Such an urbanization process brings forward, without a doubt, fundamental challenges, and investigating the adverse effects of this lie beyond the horizons of this study. While studying the literary representation of other major Iranian cities is worthy of a thorough and systematic examination in future studies, the current study's design focuses on the most significant gender-based relationships to space in the capital city as reflected in the narratives of female authors. Ultimately, the main objective of this study is to analyze fictional narrative texts authored by Iranian female writers as well as their portrayal of the public urban space of Tehran. The analytical corpus of the study, which I will introduce in detail later on, consists of four novels: *Negaran nabash*

(Mahsa Mohebbʿali), *Ehtemalan gom shodehʾam* (Sara Salar), *Natamami* (Zahra ʿAbdi) and *Az sheytan amukht va suzand* (Farkhondeh Aqaʾi).

It is important to emphasize that these novels do not represent the urban fiction of contemporary Iranian female authors in its entirety. I have limited the case studies to selective examples in order to delve into a close reading of these works whose narratological and thematic characteristics were most relevant for addressing the core questions of my research: How do Iranian female authors view the city of Tehran and express it in their writing, and to what extent has the urban geography structured their narrative? How is the figure of the female urban wanderer, the *flâneuse*, formulated in these novels to present new mappings of the city from her necessarily gendered perspective? Does the Iranian *flâneuse* feel at ease among other citizens of the city, or does she encounter obstacles during her adventures? If the latter is the case, how does she manage to maintain her presence in the city despite the struggles? Is the power structure spatially negotiated between the —majorly disempowered— urban populace and the political authority in these novels? In this regard, I will also consider how the theme of urban inequality is approached by the authors, which groups of *Tehrani*an citizens are depicted in the novels as having fewer advantages compared to the rest, and how the disadvantaged group responds to their marginalization. Are the streets of Tehran a locus of urban social movements that allow for the expression of citizens' confrontational sociopolitical attitudes? If so, how is this issue portrayed by these authors, and what kinds of demands are the characters of their novels making? To what extent is the process of identity formation for these characters shaped or disturbed by the urban setting? How are the characters' contemplations about their lives connected to their urban surroundings? Can the characters build a harmonious relationship with Tehran, or does the city's turbulence prevent such a bond from being formed?

Beyond the Iranian academic discourse, the relationship between women and urban literature has been extensively explored, with significant contributions from scholars examining the intersection of gender, space, and narrative. Deborah Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* offers focused examinations of women's interactions with urban environments, highlighting the intricate relationship between women and urban spaces in the modern era.[3] The book explores how women navigated, experienced, and portrayed the modern city in literature from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. *Lauren Elkin's Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* analyses different examples of the *flâneuse*, exploring how women have roamed and connected with five iconic cities mentioned in the title.[4] Deborah Epstein Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*

[3] Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[4] Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

looks at how Victorian women writers depicted cityscapes, navigating male-dominated spaces and critiquing societal norms.[5] In *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Susan Merrill Squier, a range of essays explores how female authors across different eras examined themes like mobility and the contrast between public and private life.[6]

As such, this study follows in the footsteps of the aforementioned research and aims to fill the gap in the Iranian academic literature regarding the representation of urban space in novels written by female authors. While extensive research has been conducted on the intersection of gender, space, and narrative in various global contexts, there remains a significant gap in the Iranian academic discourse on this topic. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing primarily on the works of Iranian female authors and examining how gender-related themes are represented within urban settings in their narratives. By exploring themes such as urban wanderings, relationship between identity and urban spatial structures, and sociopolitical aspect of female urban experience, this research will provide insight into the way in which the writers documented urban space in their writing. The integration of these interdisciplinary perspectives will help to examine the complexities of gender and urban space, highlighting how spatial structures can both constrain and empower female characters. This approach will also allow for a deeper understanding of how Iranian female authors use urban settings to challenge traditional gender roles and norms. As such, this study aims to contribute to the broader field of gender and urban literature by bringing attention to the unique perspectives and experiences of Iranian women writers.

In the following section, I will first discuss how Tehran has functioned as a literary muse for authors over the past several decades. The following section assesses how the urban sociopolitical transformations of Iran have affected female citizenry and how women writers respond to these changes. Afterward, by introducing case studies of the existing research, I also clarify the pressing significance of studying the texts written by female authors concerning their urban representations and the insights they reveal about different aspects of the sociopolitical relations in Tehran.

Tehran as a Literary Muse

Writing about the history of Tehran, Asef Bayat, an Iranian-American professor of sociology, goes so far as to suggest that Tehran is a relatively uninteresting city.[7] He astutely justifies his claim by pointing out that Tehran, vis-à-vis the neighboring counties' capital cities, has little to offer: there are no remarkable

[5] Nord, Deborah Epstein, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

[6] Susan Merrill Squier, ed., *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

[7] Asef Bayat, "Tehran: Paradox City," *New Left Review* 66 (2010), 99.

historical landmarks, nor is there any "natural charm."[8] Bayat is not exaggerating, especially regarding this latter point. During medieval times, indeed, Tehran would have appeared inconsequential to any random passerby, as it was merely a small village in the close vicinity of the ancient city of Rey. By the same token, during the Mongol invasion of Iran in 1220, when Rey was attacked and completely destroyed, the present-day capital city was spared an onslaught. Tehran was not, the Mongols assumed, even worth their regiment's time and effort to foray into the city.[9]

However, Tehran today is one of the largest and most crowded metropolitan areas in the world. With a population of more than nine million, it is the third largest city in the Middle East, ranking 38th place globally.[10] The historical event that led to this exceptional growth, and ultimately changed the fate of the city, was the decision of Agha Mohammad Khan, founder of the Qajar dynasty, to move the capital city from Shiraz to Tehran in 1786. In the decades that followed, Tehran was governed by various kings, leaders, and city councils, each of whom had distinct visions for planning and designing the city. It is no wonder, then, that Iranian authors throughout the elapsed decades have had a relatively dynamic approach regarding the representation of urban space, so that they could reflect, challenge and document the rapid changes of Tehran. To name a very early example, in *Siyahatnameh-ye Ebrahim Beyg*, often considered the first Persian prose fiction, the protagonist travels to Tehran, the capital of Qajar at the time, reporting on his observations about a city that, in his opinion, is characterized by corruption and deceit.[11]

Pahlavi regime's aspiration for a radical modernization agenda, to cite another example, bestowed upon urban writers a sense of apprehension, as reflected in the much-celebrated novel of Morteza Moshfeq-Kazemi, *Tehran-e makhuf* (Horrid Tehran).[12] The pessimistic thematic portrayal of Tehran in Moshfeq-Kazemi's story, also noticeably suggested in the title of the novel, is emblematic of a city entrenched in an irresolvable dichotomy between a traditional and modern lifestyle, while the streets are fraught with urban ills, deprivation, and immorality. To a certain extent, the same approach was adopted by other authors of his generation and the next, including Mohammad Hejazi and Gholamhoseyn Saʿedi, among many others.[13] Interestingly, akin to the literary tendency of the Victorian era, prostitution in the novels of the mentioned authors is portrayed as a social

[8] Ibid.

[9] Vladimir Minorsky, "Teheran," in *E.J. Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913–1936*, ed. M. Th Houtsma et al. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 715.

[10] "Baravard-e jamʿiyat-e shahrestan-ha (Survey on the Cities' Population)" (Markaz-e amar-e Iran (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022); "World City Populations 2022" (World Population Review, 2022).

[11] M. R. Ghanoonparvar, "Tales of Two Cities: Tehran in Persian Fiction," *Iran Namag* 5, no. 3 (2020), 19.

[12] Morteza Moshfeq-Kazemi, *Tehran-e makhuf* (Tehran: Arghanun, 1925).

[13] M. R. Ghanoonparvar, "Tales of Two Cities," 19.

contaminant and embodies the idea of decadent human life in the new urban environment.[14] An example of this is seen in Hejazi's novel, *Ziba* (Beautiful), in which the character of a prostitute drags the sexually inexperienced male protagonist, a naïve seminary student with provincial roots, toward addiction and vice, turning him into a morally-degraded person.[15] Moshfeq-Kazemi, likewise, in his novel, writes extensively about a district whose name is quite tellingly *Mahalleh-ye Mariz* (Sick Neighborhood), and describes it as an area where prostitution-oriented businesses prevail. He mainly focuses on four female prostitutes who work at a brothel managed by a *khanum ra'is* (a female brothel keeper), allocating four chapters of his novel to these characters and exploring how they are all victims of the temptations of the city.[16]

Another writer who pays particular attention to urban-related themes in his writing is Esmaʿil Fasih, a well-known realist novelist. The Tehran envisaged by Fasih is a locus of vice and virtue, as the characters' hardships in his action-packed stories are frequently intertwined with the struggles of growing up in working-class neighborhoods. *Del-e kur*, to mention an example, narrates the story of three generations of a *Tehrani*an family in one of the poor neighborhoods of the southern part of the city, Darkhungah.[17] In writing the tragic fate of several characters in the poverty-wrecked streets of Darkhungah, Fasih explores themes of urban violence, social exclusion, and family tension.

In recent decades, after the appearance of several novels written about the experiences of *Tehrani*an urbanites, the city has become canonized as a literary interest. It is important, however, to highlight that after the Islamic Revolution, the state exerted systematic censorship over the content of cultural products through a newly established bureau entitled *Vezarat-e farhang va ershad-e eslami* (The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance). Consequently, the content of books, movie scripts, plays, or song lyrics must be submitted to the ministry before publication in order to be monitored and assessed in regard to their conformity to the main principles of the Islamic government. This process has undoubtedly affected the content of published literary texts in recent decades, as it has also prevented some authors from publishing their work and maintaining their writing careers in Iran. For instance, Amir Ahmadi Arian's second novel, *Ghiyab-e Danial* (Danial's Absence), went through various rounds of censorship and eventually did not obtain permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and was therefore self-published by the author after he left Iran to continue

[14] For an extensive elaboration on the implication and dynamic of the representation of prostitution in the Victorian novels, see: Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1-18.

[15] Mohammad Hejazi, *Ziba* (Tehran: Ebn-e Sina, 1930).

[16] Ghanoonparvar, "Tales of Two Cities: Tehran in Persian Fiction," 55; for a brief analysis of the portrayal of female characters as victims in *Tehran-e makhuf* and some other literary narratives of the Persian literature, see: Azar Nafisi, "The Quest for the 'Real' Woman in the Iranian Novel," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (September 2003), 992.

[17] Esmaʿil Fasih, *Del-e kur* (Tehran: Nashr-e Now, 1993).

his career outside the country. Interestingly, Ahmadi Arian's story is an urban novel and follows the adventures of its protagonist, a young boy with provincial roots who studies at Tehran University in the late 1990s, a time that coincides with Iranian society's aspiration for a reform which led to the election of Mohammad Khatami as the president in 1997.[18]

Some other instances of published urban novels, possibly in an attempt to avoid the impending censorship, drew upon the city's transformation from the past to narrate the present-day condition of Tehran. Amir Hasan Cheheltan's *Tehran shahr-e bi-aseman* (Tehran the city without sky), for example, pieces together the history of Tehran from the turmoil of the 1953 coup d'état to the early years of the Islamic Revolution through the perspective of a *lompan* (a thug or a ruffian), and offers a distinctive standpoint on the life of the lower social class of Tehran.[19] Likewise, *Jasadha-ye shishe'i*, a novel by Mas'ud Kimiyayi, signifies the nostalgic urge of the author for the old Tehran, which is also a primary theme of the films he directed, and is set when Tehran is in the throes of the coup d'état, presenting its own gallery of *lompan* characters.[20]

In this respect, Tehran is continuously represented in a series of recently published literary works as a central narratological element through which writers explore the meaning and values associated with the capital city. For instance, Hoseyn Sanapur approaches Tehran as a semiotic backdrop in which the personal dilemmas of his character are ceaselessly affected by the urban environment of Tehran. *Nimeh-ye ghayeb*, a well-celebrated and commercially successful novel by Sanapur, as an example, is set in post-war Tehran in which he charts the influence of the urban surroundings on the everyday life of the main characters of the novel.[21] Likewise, in Kaveh Fuladinasab's novel, *Hasht-o chehel-o chahar* (Eight and Forty-Four [minutes]), the story of the protagonist, a watchmaker, develops through his constant wanderings in the streets of the southern part of Tehran.[22] Another example is Sina Dakhah's debut novel, *Yusef abad, khiyaban-e siy-o sevvom* (Yusef Abad, 33rd Street), which follows the romantic pursuits of the characters

[18] Amir Ahmadi Arian, *Ghiyab-e Danial* (self-pub, 2016); the author, in an article, has recounted in detail his interactions with the staff of The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance about the extensive redactions on his novel, see: Amir Ahmadi Arian, "Navigating Literary Censorship—and Worse—in Iran," *Literary Hub*, September 28, 2020.

[19] Amir Hasan Cheheltan, *Tehran, shahr-e bi-asman* (Tehran: Negah, 2009); *Lompan,* originates from the term *lumpenproletariat* in Marxist terminology, and in Iranian society generally refers to an illiterate and vulgar individual. Historically, it alludes to the lower social class during the reign of Reza Shah who played a vital role in overthrowing Mohammad Mossadegh, the Prime Minister at the time. For an extensive study on the relationship between the political tumult of the Pahlavi era and the function of these politically "dangerous" social classes, see: Olmo Gölz, "The Dangerous Classes and the 1953 Coup in Iran: On the Decline of 'lutigari' Masculinities," in *Crime, Poverty and Survival in the Middle East and North Africa: The "dangerous Classes" since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 177–90.

[20] Mas'ud Kimiyayi, *Jasadha-ye shishe'i* (Tehran: Akhtaran, 2000).

[21] Hoseyn Sanapur, *Nimeh-ye ghayeb* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 1999).

[22] Kavah Fuladinasab, *Hasht va chehel-o chahar* (Cheshmeh, 2016).

in Tehran, whose landscape correlates to the individuals' memories and subjectivity.[23]

While urban fiction became an object of much attention among Iranian authors, some scholarly endeavors have also acknowledged the importance of the topic by analyzing the relationship between fiction and the city. *Ostureh-ye Tehran* (The Myth of Tehran) is presumably the first systematic study in this regard, in which Jalal Sattari, a prominent mythologist, literary critic, and translator, explores the textual representation of Tehran in a variety of books such as travelogues, novels, and short stories. Sattari concludes that the city does not have a constitutive role in the writings of Iranian authors.[24] Although Sattari's reading of the literary representation of Tehran served as a base for future studies, his findings are mainly descriptive and fail to offer an analytically conclusive discussion about the topic. Sattari mainly focuses on the segments in which the material aspect of the city is mentioned, and as such, his arguments are dismissive of the human relations existing in an urban environment.

Sattari's attempt was nevertheless followed by the work of other scholars working in Iranian academic institutions as they examined the fictional representation of and the meanings attributed to Iranian cities, especially Tehran. Baharak Mahmudi, an assistant professor of Journalism at ʿAllameh Tabataba'i University, for instance, has focused on exploring the representational approaches of filmmakers toward the Iranian cities.[25] Narges Khalesi Moqaddam, to name another example, has also published a monograph investigating how the process of modern urbanization was reflected in the literary works during the Pahlavi era.[26] More recently, Anita Saleh Bolurdi and Abolhasan Riyazi published a comparative analysis of Tehran and Paris's cinematic and literary representations.[27] Likewise, several studies published abroad have also attempted to debate the imagined geographies of Iranian authors, clarifying how the representation of cities is related to the actual urban environment of Iran. Blake Atwood, Associate Professor of Media Studies, for instance, examines the characteristics of the youth culture of Tehran by analyzing four novels published by the younger generation of Iranian

[23] Sina Dadkhah, *Yusef abad, khiyaban-e siy-o sevvom* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2009).

[24] Jalal Sattari, *Ostureh-ye Tehran*, vol. 1, Majmuʿeh-ye Tehranshahr (Tehran: Daftar-e pazhuheshha-ye farhangi, 2006), 242.

[25] Mahmudi has recently edited a volume of articles about the topic. See: Baharak Mahmudi, ed., *Shahr va sinama dar Iran* (Tehran: Entesharat-e ʿElmi va Farhangi, 2021).

[26] Narges Khalesi Moqaddam, *Shahr va tajrobeh-ye moderniteh-ye Farsi* (Tehran: Tisa, 2012).

[27] Seyyed Abolhasan Riyazi and Anita Saleh Bolurdi, *Chegunegi-ye baznamayi-ye shahr dar adabiyat va sinama: Tehran va Paris* (Tehran: Sales, 2021).

authors.[28] Ghanoonparvar, Professor Emeritus of Persian and Comparative Literature, also has a forthcoming monograph in which he examines the representation of Iranian cities in various forms of fictional texts.[29]

As demonstrated above, the academic discourse concerning the characteristics of Iranian urban novels is still relatively limited. While there is an increasing interest in the topic, no single study among those published has focused entirely on the Iranian female authors' approach to the urban setting. As will be discussed thoroughly in the next section, the urban vision of female authors varies from that of the male authors in the sense that it reflects the condition of the city based on the writers' distinctive urban experience, and this experience is strongly affected by, concerned with, and shaped by social and political processes of the country.

Iranian Female Authors & Tehran: Female Experience of Public Space

The major political changes throughout the history of Iran, especially those concerning the discourse of modernity and the shifting attitude towards western culture, have been, in one way or another, "projected upon women's bodies and the space they occupy."[30] The forced act of veiling and unveiling, implemented in 1983 and 1936 respectively, are telling examples where in both scenarios one of the central notions of (re)constructing the identity and ideology of the ruling power was to regulate and control women's bodies in public spaces.

The issue of the veil, however, is the most tangible aspect of the governmental attempts to harmonize the urban culture of Iran. The 1979 Iranian Revolution immensely reconfigured Iran's cultural, political, and social structure.[31] A significant part of these alterations entailed gender-specific regulations. Subsequently, the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war "helped the regime to consolidate its new policies including those on sexuality."[32] During the war, however, the government's doctrine concerning the presence of women in public, in part prompted by the disastrous economic impact of the war, changed only slightly. In

[28] Blake Atwood, "Tehran's Textual Topography: Mapping Youth Culture in Contemporary Persian Literature," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 35 (2015): 123–51.

[29] M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *Iranian Cities in Persian Fiction* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2022).

[30] Farzaneh Milani, *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 1.

[31] Since this study does not particularly engage with the pre-revolutionary social history of Iranian women and merely focuses on the post-revolutionary urban aspects of gender relations as represented in literary texts, for a survey on how gender and sexuality have shaped the modern history of Iran, see: Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[32] Afary, "Sexual Politics in Modern Iran.", 265.

this respect, women were encouraged to be socially engaged throughout the conflict, which at first was manifested in mobilizing them in "administrative, nursing and educational activities" and was later on expanded to support female volunteers who wanted to participate in the military practices.[33]

As such, during the nearly four decades since the war, the Iranian public scene has become an arena for the power struggle between women and the state, which is why this topic—the oppositional attitude formed around everyday spatial practices of women—has become a major focus of sociological and anthropological scholarship about Iranian society. Asef Bayat, for instance, traces the gradual changes in the situation of women after the Islamic revolution, arguing that their "collective presence" has challenged the official Islamic hegemony and has led to considerable sociopolitical change.[34] In the same vein, Shahram Khosravi argues in his ethnographic monograph about the subculture of urban youth in Tehran that the act of "improper veiling" by women is an attempt to resist the state's systematic control of public spaces.[35] There has also been an increasing scholarly interest in Iranian women's urban experience, discussing how the new state's doctrine affected female presence in cities. Reza Arjmand, for instance, has selected women-only parks, one of the government's segregationist policies, as his case study to investigate how the Islamization agenda of the state has produced gendered public spaces.[36]

I briefly discussed earlier that there has been no scholarly discussion about the urban experience, spatial observations, and gendered model of exploring the city in the narratives of Iranian female authors. Significantly, however, a constitutive element in women's writing that reflects on societal issues is the urban sphere and the complex nexus of human relations within it. This issue is also apparent in Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun*, which is recognized by scholars of Persian literature as the first published novel by an Iranian female writer. Although Daneshvar's novel is not particularly fixated on the urban space, it nevertheless depicts the city of Shiraz as a bedlam dominated by politically and emotionally charged incidents.[37]

However, due to the general improvement of the social status of women, the next generation of female writers after Simin Daneshvar, which includes authors such as Mahshid Amirshahi and Shahrnush Parsipur, set out to contribute their specifically urban observations to the growing body of modern Persian liter-

[33] Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 305–*307*.

[34] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2. Ed (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[35] Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, Contemporary Ethnography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 169.

[36] Reza Arjmand, *Public Urban Space, Gender and Segregation: Women-Only Urban Parks in Iran*, Routledge Studies in Human Geography (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

[37] Simin Daneshvar, *Savushun* (Tehran: Khvarazmi, 1969).

ature. Since part of the modernization policy initiated during the Pahlavi era pertained to "the encouragement of women to be active in the public sphere," women's increasing access to the city and its opportunities facilitated the growing presence of female writers, among whose works were several urban novels.[38] Some of these stories, however, were published outside of Iran and by authors fleeing the country after the Islamic Revolution. Mahshid Amirshahi, who has spent most of her writing career in France in exile, published her first novel, *Dar hazar* (At Home), in 1987.[39] The novel's plot revolves around the tumultuous days leading up to the Islamic Revolution, as Amirshahi constantly brings her protagonist to the streets to observe the upheavals of Tehran and report on the disaffected masses of people whose rage occasionally leads to violence. In this respect, the narrative provides an urban account of the Islamic Revolution, exploring how the city enabled such a consequential political action.

Similarly, Shahrnush Parsipur, a prominent Iranian writer who has also left Iran due to severe censorship of her work, set most of her stories in Tehran. Her well-received novel, *Tuba va maʿna-ye shab* (Tuba and the Meaning of Night), offers a feministic outlook on her protagonist's life that spans an eventful eight decades.[40] With Tehran as the backdrop of the story, Parsipur recounts the condition of the city during several momentous historical changes, such as the Constitutional Revolution of the Qajar era, the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, the foreign invasion of the city during the outbreak of World War II, the pivotal days of the 1953 coup d'état and the subsequent overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq's government.[41] This latter political event is also the setting of Parsipur's most famous work, a collection of short stories entitled *Zanan bedun-e mardan* (Women Without Men).[42]

The burden of censorship and other restrictive measures in post-revolutionary Iranian literature was briefly eased during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the reformist, culturally progressive president. As such, there was a short period of freedom for Iranian writers, including women, in the 1990s. Less censorship and less cultural repression allowed female writers to flourish.[43] Not

[38] Kamran Talattof, "Iranian Women's Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (November 1997), 533; it is essential to note that although Reza Shah's initiative supported the modernization of society and the presence of women in public, a part of the female population who were reluctant to be unveiled had a limited presence in public spaces. See: Afary, "Sexual Politics in Modern Iran," 157.

[39] Mahshid Amirshahi, *Dar hazar* (London: Cushing-Malloy, 1987).

[40] Shahrnush Parsipur, *Tuba va maʿna-ye shab* (Tehran: Esperak, 1989).

[41] Ghanoonparvar, "Tales of Two Cities," 34.

[42] Shahrnush Parsipur, *Zanan bedun-e mardan* (Tehran: Noqreh, 1989).

[43] However, the relatively modified censorship system was reversed entirely in the government of the next president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad. For a brief comparison between varying censorship policies under different Iranian presidents, see this report: James Marchant, "Writer's Block: Iranian Literary Censorship and Diaspora Publishing," Revolution Decoded: Iran's Digital Media Landscape (Small Media, 2014), https://smallmedia.org.uk.

only did the number of Iranian female writers increase, but the gendered dimension of their everyday experiences became salient in their writings. Moreover, considering the rapid changes in Iranian cities and their influence on female inhabitants, Iranian female authors started exploring urban themes in their stories.

Interestingly, akin to the literary trend adopted by several male authors regarding a nostalgia for old Tehran, some female writers also favored the narrativization of the city as they remembered it. Goli Taraqqi's stories, for example, often take place in and denote a longing for 1950s Tehran, the spatiotemporal context in which the author spent her childhood.[44] Nevertheless, not all female authors were keen on presenting a nostalgically charged account of Tehran. For some, the urban reality of the contemporary city was deeply interesting, and they reflected on the everyday life of inhabitants in their writing. Belqeys Soleymani's *Ruz-e khargush* (Rabbit Day), for instance, depicts the life of a female taxi driver in Tehran, delineating a distinctive representation of the city through the observations of her protagonist.[45] Nasim Marʿashi's Best-Selling debut novel, *Payiz fasl-e akhar-e sal ast* (Fall is the Last Season of the Year), also explores the interconnectedness of the main characters' emotional states with the particular conditions of today's Tehran.[46] The protagonist of Zahra Shahi's novel, *Pich* (Twist), maps the city of Tehran and offers her observations by deploying a cynical but humorous tone, signifying both her comfort and irritation regarding the social aspect of the urban setting.[47] Likewise, *In khane pelak nadarad* (This House Does not Have a Number) narrates the story of two young girls who rent a mysterious old house in Tehran's city center. After a while, they realize a suspicious young man has fixed his voyeuristic gaze on their house and they become worried about their safety.[48]

Although the above-mentioned examples provide insights into the literary articulation of the female experience of urban life, I have decided to limit the analytical corpus of the study to the novels in which the public space of the city induces, or considerably affects the conflict within their narratives. The selected novels of this study mainly reflect on and explore the underlying social, cultural, and political aspects of Iranian urban society through the narrative trajectory of their main characters. As previously mentioned, this book, as an interdisciplinary study, brings together insights from various disciplines to offer an overarching analysis of the characteristics of Tehran as imagined, fictionalized, and documented by Iranian female authors. Given that various social relations and political dynamics reciprocally shape and are shaped by the spatial practices of Iranian

[44] For an extensive study on the representation of the urban space of Tehran and the relationship between space and identity in Taraqqi's works, see: Goulia Ghardashkhani, *Another Place: Identity, Space, and Transcultural Signification in Goli Taraqqi's Fiction*, Iran Studies, volume 17 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018).

[45] Belqeys Soleymani, *Ruz-e khargush* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2012).

[46] Nasim Marʿashi, *Payiz fasl-e akhar-e sal ast* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2015).

[47] Zahra Shahi, *Pich* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2017).

[48] Farzanah Karampur and Ladan Niknam, *In khanah pelak nadarad* (Tehran: Qoqnus, 2014).

citizens, particularly women, it was important for my research to engage extensively with and trace the literary revelations of female writers in this regard. As such, at the center of this study are novels whose writers presented their authorial mediation on how the everyday urban life of Iranian women reacted to the aforementioned regulations and entered into conflict with the state-approved values. Exploring the themes of displacement, urban alienation, and social marginalization was another important factor that shaped the analytical corpus of the study.

In the next section, I introduce the four novels that will be examined in the following chapters. I will present a short biography of the authors as well as a very brief plot summary, and subsequently, I will explain their integration into this study based on the reasons listed above.

Overview of Novels Selected for Analysis

Negaran nabash: Mahsa Mohebbʿali

Mahsa Mohebbʿali was born in Tehran on August 12, 1972, and stated in an interview that her childhood experience was significantly impacted by the post-revolutionary political tumult: "I was in the first grade of the primary school when the revolution took place, I was in the third grade when the war started, and I was in the third year of high school when the war ended. That is, I spent almost the entire period of my education in the revolution and the war."[49]

Mohebbʿali started her writing career by attending Reza Baraheni's workshop and published her first short story collection, Seda (Voice) when she was twenty-six.[50] Although she pursued her studies in an undergraduate bachelor's degree in music, she continued publishing various literary essays in Iranian newspapers. Mohebbʿali made her literary breakthrough with the second short story collection, *ʿAsheqiyat dar pavaraqi* (Love in the Footnotes), as The Hushang Golshiri Literary foundation awarded her a literary prize.[51]

Seven years later, Mohebbʿali would win, once again, The Golshiri Foundation's prize for the Best Novel of the Year with *Negaran nabash* (Don't Worry), the novel that will be analyzed in this study.[52] The entire narrative plot of Mohebbʿali's novel, as will be recounted in detail in the third chapter, is set against the backdrop of a chaotic and disorderly Tehran hit by an earthquake. The story is narrated by the protagonist, a young girl affected by drug abuse, who walks about the streets searching for her next dose of drugs.

[49] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, Negaran nabash, interview by Seyyed ʿAdel Rahmati, November 12, 2018, http://40cheragh.org.

[50] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Seda* (Tehran: Khayyam, 1998).

[51] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *ʿAsheqiyat dar pavaraqi* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2004); meanwhile, she also published her first novel: Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Nefrin-e khakestari* (Tehran: Ofoq, 2022).

[52] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2008).

Figure 1. Book cover illustrations of *Negaran nabash* in different languages

Negaran nabash was an immediate success, not only among literary critics but also among readers. Within two years of its first publication, for example, the 11th reprint of the book was distributed. Interestingly, the novel has been translated into three different languages, which, considering that Persian literature is generally underrepresented in the international book market, makes the novel one of the very few successful examples in this regard. Aside from its Swedish and Italian translations, the novel has been recently translated into English by the independent literary publisher Feminist Press under the title *In Case of Emergency*.[53]

In 2016, Mahsa Mohebb'ali published another novel titled *Vay khvahim sad* (We Will Stand). She chose Zaryab, an Afghan publisher located in Kabul, to publish this novel since she was certain that due to the severe censorship as well as the content of her book, it would not obtain the publishing permit through official means in Iran. Mohebb'ali's *Vay khvahim sad* narrates the story of Elham, who was featured as a minor character in *Negaran nabash*. Her name is mentioned

[53] Mahsa Mohebb'ali, *Var Inte Orolig*, trans. Robab Moheb (Ballingslöv: L'Aleph: Wisehouse AB, 2013); Mahsa Mohebb'ali, *Non Ti Preoccupare*, trans. Giacomo Longhi (Civitavecchia (RM): Ponte33, 2015); Mahsa Mohebb'ali, *In Case of Emergency*, trans. Mariam Rahmani, First Feminist Press edition (New York City: Feminist Press, 2021).

several times throughout the narrative, and the novel's protagonist even visits her house. Nevertheless, the life story of Elham and her whereabouts during the eventful day of the earthquake are not extensively explored in *Negaran nabash*. Upon publishing this novel, the author declared that *Negaran nabash* is part of a trilogy, and *Vay khvahim sad* narrates the events two weeks prior to the earthquake. *Vay khvahim sad* has also been translated by Giacomo Longhi into Italian under the title of Tehran Girl.[54]

Ehtemelan gom shodehʾam: Sara Salar

The other novel that will be studied alongside *Negaran nabash* in the third chapter is *Ehtemelan gom shodehʾam* (I'm probably lost), Sara Salar's debut novel.[55] She was born in 1966 in Zahedan and began her literary career as a translator while studying English literature at the university. After participating in the writing workshop of Mohammad Hasan Shahsavari, she published her first novel in 2010. Set in Tehran, the plot of *Ehtemalan* revolves around a woman in her mid-thirties who continuously rehashes her memories while driving aimlessly on crowded highways. The reader receives scattered information about the protagonist's past life and her identity struggle through her constant reflections. *Ehtemalan* received critical acclaim and was awarded The Hushang Golshiri Literary Award for Best Debut Novel in 2011. Thus far, the novel has been reprinted 14 times by Cheshmeh Publication, signifying its popularity among a broad audience in Iran. Salar's novel was also translated and distributed internationally. Only four years after its publication in Iran, it was translated into German and Italian by Kirchheim Publishing House and Ponte33, respectively.[56] In the same year, Sara Salar published her second novel, *Hast ya nist*.[57]

Sara Salar rarely gives interviews, but in the very few talks she has given after publishing her novels, she elaborated on the formative role her childhood hometown, Zahedan, played in her writing. As will be thoroughly studied in the fifth chapter, the characteristics of a small town, especially in contrast to the variety of opportunities in a larger urban setting, have endlessly informed and inspired her writing: "We spent our summers in Zahedan reading books, as there were no other activities. Instead, we were at the library all the time, and we kept borrowing books."[58] In an article, Salar reveals that not unlike the protagonist of

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[54] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Vay Khahim Sad* (Kabul: Zaryab, 2016); Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Tehran girl*, trans. Giacomo Longhi (Milano: Bompiani, 2020).

[55] Sara Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodehʾam* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2010).

[56] Sara Salar, *Hab ich mich verirrt?*, trans. Jutta Himmelreich (München: Kirchheim, 2014).
Sara Salar, *Probabilmente mi sono persa*, trans. J. Nassir (Civitavecchia: Ponte33, 2014).

[57] Sara Salar, *Hast ya nist*, Tehran (Tehran: Charkh, 2014).

[58] Sara Salar, Daghdaghe-haye man ensani hastand, interview by Elaheh Khosravi Yeganeh, April 2014.

Figure 2. Book cover illustrations of *Ehtemalan* in its Persian original and the translations

her novel, she also yearned to leave Zahedan during her adolescent years, although she admits that the memories of the town are an inseparable part of her identity as an adult.[59] These biographical pieces of information are relatively adjacent to the narrative trajectory of the main character of *Ehtemalan*. The novel is by no means a self-narration or an autobiographical account of the author, yet, these similar lived experiences have rendered the tone in her narrative more intimate. I will return to this topic when her novel is analyzed in the fifth chapter of this book.

Natamami: Zahra ʿAbdi

Zahra ʿAbdi is the youngest author whose second novel, *Natamami* (Unfinished), will be studied in this study. She was born in 1984 and started her literary career by publishing a volume of poetry entitled *To ba khers sangintar az kuh raqsideh'i* (You have danced with a bear heavier than a mountain).[60] After obtaining a master's degree in Persian literature, she published her first novel *Ruz-e halazun* (Snail Day) in 2013. Five years later, Francesco Brioschi Editore translated the novel into Italian under the title *A Teheran le lumache fanno rumore*.[61] Additionally, a French translation of the novel, *La complainte de la limace*, was also printed by Belleville Editions in 2020.[62]

Zahra ʿAbdi's *Natamami* narrates the story of a young female student at Tehran University who has recently left her small hometown to move to the capital city. Upon receiving the news that her mysterious roommate has gone missing, the protagonist seeks to follow the traces of her friend within the turmoil of the capital city. The protagonist's journey, however, is not the only one narrated

[59] Sara Salar, "Zahedan be revayat-e Sara Salar," March 28, 2015.

[60] Zahra ʿAbdi, *To Ba khers sangintar az kuh raqsideh'i* (Tehran: Qu, 2008).

[61] Zahra ʿAbdi, *A Tehran le lumache fanno rumore*, trans. Anna Vanzan (Milan: Francesco Brioschi Editore, 2017).

[62] Zahra ʿAbdi, *La complainte de la limace*, trans. Christophe Balaÿ (Paris: Belleville Editions, 2020).

in the novel, as there are several other characters whose accounts of urban adventure are partially interwoven in the narrative thread insofar as they affect the events of the two main characters' lives. ʿAbdi mainly focuses on the marginalized communities of Tehran and the inhabitants who live in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of the southern part of the city. The author indicates that in order to be able to present a realistic impression of the life of these groups of inhabitants, she visited south Tehran, talked to people, and interviewed the staff of charity organizations.[63]

Figure 3. Book cover of *Natamami*

After *Natamami*, ʿAbdi published another novel, *Tariki-ye moʿallaq-e ruz* (Hovering darkness of the day), in 2019. Nevertheless, she has recently announced on her personal social media account that her novels have been officially forbidden from being republished altogether, and her new book, *Pedaran va bi-pedaran* (Fathers and without Fathers), has also not yet been granted publishing permission.[64]

Az sheytan amukht va suzand: Farkhondeh Aqaʾi

The fourth, and last novel, that will be discussed in the book is Farkhondeh Aqaʾi's *Az sheytan amukht va suzand* (From the Devil, Learned and Burned) which was printed in 2014 by Qoqnus publishing house. Born in 1956 in Tehran, Aqaʾi obtained a bachelor's degree in business administration and continued her study as a graduate student in urban planning. However, the Iranian Cultural Revolution in 1980 led to the shutdown of universities. Aqaʾi's studies were also interrupted, and she had to re-enroll later on for a master's degree in Sociology. Afterward, she held a full-time job as a bank employee and did not follow her literary

[63] Zahra ʿAbdi, Goftogu ba Zahra ʿAbdi, interview by Reza Mahdavi, October 21, 2017.

[64] Zahra ʿAbdi, "All My Books Were Banned from Publication," Instagram, March 1, 2021.

ambitions until after her 30s. Correspondingly, Aqa'i's first novel, entitled *Jensiyat-e gomshodeh* (The Lost Gender), was published in 2000, narrating the story of an Iranian transsexual woman.[65]

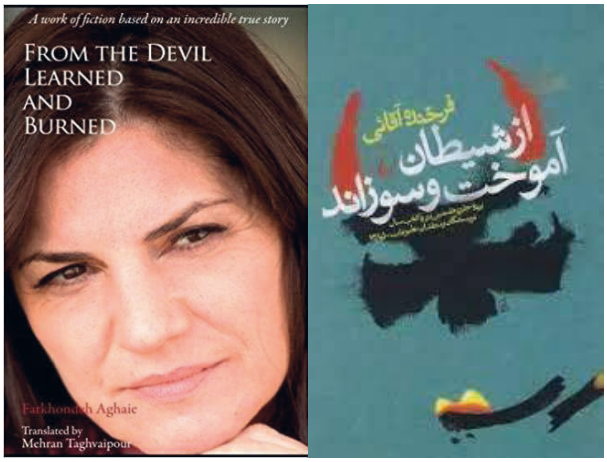

Figure 4. The Persian original book cover illustration of *Az sheytan* beside its translated version

Encouraged by the positive response from critics and the audience, Aqa'i' continued her writing career by publishing another novel, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, which was recognized as the best fiction of the year by the Critics and Press Writers Award (*Jayezeh-ye nevisandegan va montaqedan-e matbu'ati*).[66] Almost two decades later, the novel was translated into English by Mehran Taghvaipur under the title *From the Devil: Learned and Burned*.[67] A significant feature of this novel is that the entire narrative is written in fictive diary format and is focalized through the protagonist's viewpoint and by means of her own narrated words. The story unfolds throughout a tumultuous period of the main character's life during which different aspects of her identity are challenged as the protagonist loses her social status, her home, and her financial security.

It is interesting to note that Aqa'i often draws inspiration from the people around her, as she stated in her interviews that the protagonist of *Az sheytan* is loosely based on a real woman with whom she talked extensively in order to glean material for creating her story.[68] In general, in her interviews, Aqa'i frequently asserts that she commits herself to reflect upon societal issues in her writing, especially topics related to gender inequality. In *Az sheytan*, Aqa'i focuses mainly on how gender relations and gender identity are foregrounded in the underlying so-

[65] Farkhondeh Aqa'i, *Jensiyat-e gomshodeh* (Tehran: Alborz, 2000).

[66] Farkhondeh Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand* (Tehran: Qoqnus, 2005).

[67] Farkhondeh Aqa'i, *From the Devil, Learned and Burned*, trans. Mehran Taghvaipour (London: Satrap, 2017).

[68] Farkhondeh Aqa'i, Kheyli-ha ba khandanash geryeh kardeh'and, Jame Jam online, December 29, 2009; Aqa'i has also published another book, *In 'Aziziyeh with 'Aziz jan*, a semi-fictional travelogue whose events are based on her Hajj experience, see: Farkhondeh Aqa'i, *Dar 'aziziyeh ba 'aziz Jan* (Tehran: Qoqnus, 2016).

cio-spatial context of Iran. The author's preoccupation with the cityscape of Tehran is not surprising, given that, as stated above, she was briefly enrolled as a graduate student in urban planning.

Chapter Structure

The overall structure of the study consists of six chapters, including this introductory section that covered a brief chronicle of Tehran's urban transformation, a detailed exploration of how these processes affected Iranian authors, and to what extent they documented urban-related themes in their writing. Also discussed were the political changes in Iran, especially those whose effects were predominantly apparent in the public space, how they affected the female citizenry, and how the women writers documented the social conflict in their writings. In the second chapter, an outline of the primary theoretical pillars of the research is provided. The exploration of these concepts is not limited to this section, because in the following chapters, I will advance upon the previously discussed frameworks or present new theoretical ideas to provide a wider scope to analyze the specific details of how Tehran has been narrativized by these authors. The rest of the book is composed of three themed chapters, each focusing on two of the aforementioned novels. All of these chapters follow a relatively similar structure: the first sub-chapter offers a short plot summary of the novel to acquaint the reader with the story's main events and central conflict. This section is followed by another sub-chapter which lays out the novel's main narratological features that facilitate and inform the subsequent discussion. After analyzing the novels, the concluding subsection of each chapter offers a very concise comparison between the two novels that were discussed. Provided the novel has already been discussed in the previous chapters, the segments concerning plot summary and narratological features are not repeated.

Accordingly, the third chapter of the book analyzes the female characters of *Negaran nabash* and *Ehtemalan gom shodeh ʾam* as instances of the figure of the female urban wanderer, or the *flâneuse*. In this respect, this chapter examines the literary articulation of the Iranian *flâneuse*: how the figure has been re-conceptualized in the context of *Tehrani*an urban space and reflects particular sociocultural characteristics of the urban environment. The vantage points of *flâneuse*s in the assessed novels are directed not only toward the artifact of the city but also toward the urban history and the city's relatively chaotic path of urban transformation. The gender relations in the context of Iranian urban society, moreover, play a vital role in the *flâneurial* observations of the characters, as their spatialized anxiety is, to a large extent, engendered by presuming that they are the object of an unwanted gaze directed at them by other (mostly male) inhabitants.

Chapter four deals with the political aspect of the urban space of Tehran and investigates how the characters of *Negaran nabash* and *Natamami* aim to de-

mand their rights from the city. In this chapter, there is a particular focus on examining the underlying sociopolitical dynamics and their reciprocal relationship to the urban setting. The discussed urban conflict is politically induced and imbued with a social force. For instance, the urban tumult of Mohebbʿali's novel is depicted first and foremost with the need for political agency, evidenced by various characters who constantly refer to this aspect of their urban right. On the other hand, although *Natamami* also addresses similar political themes, it primarily focuses on the social conflict among inhabitants and explores how the dominant social culture of *Tehrani*an citizens who consider themselves locals can lead to the marginalization of newcomers to the capital city.

The main objective of the sixth chapter is to study the process of characters' identity formation in relation to the surrounding space, particularly the urban locale. In this section, the analysis is centered on two novels, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand* and *Ehtemalan gom shodehʾam*, in which the concept of identity shapes the primary conflicts of both narrative texts. The main focus of this chapter is directed toward the character-place bonding dynamic, examining how this theme is developed throughout the narratives in question. This chapter, specifically, employs a narratological framework to clarify how the entanglements of narrative urban space and identity are portrayed by the authors. Lastly, the final chapter of the book sketches a broad outline of the discussions in the preceding chapters, making connections between similar trends in the writers' approaches to textualizing urban space and exploring how the city is represented in these novels.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the study's theoretical framework, some aspects of which I briefly mentioned. The primary focus is on the concept of the urban wanderer, or the *flâneur*, which I will look at more critically in the following section.

Chapter II: The *Flâneuse*, The Right to the City, and Spatial Identities: Research Context and Key Theoretical Terms

Academic writings on literary representations of cities have approached the topic in various ways. These research studies seek to analyze the transition of urban environments' dynamics into the particular characteristics of textual narratives by drawing insights from urban theorists, scholars of sociology, political scientists, and cultural theorists.[69]

This research project is, correspondingly, based on an interdisciplinary outlook and deploys three main theoretical approaches: the cultural concept of the *flâneuse*, the sociopolitical notion of the Right to the City, and finally, the narratological approaches to the process of identity formation. As I have briefly explained in the introductory chapter, the exploration of theoretical concepts is not limited to this section, as I will continue to bring forward and deploy pertinent concepts of other disciplines, in particular, for instance, those of feminist theorists, to develop an understanding of the role of gender in textualization of urban space in Iranian literature.

The first sub-chapter offers a detailed history of conceptualizing the figure of the urban wanderer, or the *flâneur*. I will then discuss the importance of re-articulating the figure as a female persona while exploring her distinctive urban vision. The second sub-chapter concerns the seminal theory of Henri Lefebvre, the Right to the City. Tracing the development of the concept in the past decades, I will discuss how it has been subject to considerable debate. I will further argue in what sense the concept is relevant in studying the literary imaginations concerning urban conditions. The final sub-section includes an overview of the relationship between narrative space and identity, introducing the main theoretical framework that I will deploy in chapter five, in which I analyze the process of identity formation of characters regarding urban space.

The Figure of the *Flâneur*: The Everlasting Urban Myth

Since the historical figure of the *flâneur* started his journey in Parisian boulevards in the 18th century, the figure has been diversely theorized. Many scholarly debates on the *flâneur* regarded the figure as a male persona. As will be established in this chapter, the aforesaid perception of the *flâneur* is misleading and undermines the figure's flexibility to be used as a cultural concept. Regarding

[69] For an overview of the scholarship concerning the relationship between urban space and literature, see: Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998); Kevin R McNamara, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature.*, ed. Kevin R McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

the figure as such, cultural and literary critics have demonstrated various ways in which the *flâneur* approaches urban environments: Dianne Chisholm, for example, examined how the queer *flâneur* interacts with the city and experiences his/her own subcultural urban space.[70] Tom McDonough offers a dichotomous reading of the *flâneur*, arguing that the figure can, on the one hand, be read as an urban detective whose strolls seek to solve the city's crimes. On the other hand, the *flâneur* can be a criminal, and "his wanderings through the city streets as themselves perhaps criminal acts, inevitably leading him to a crime."[71] Investigating the act of flânerie in New York, Eric Tribunella analyzes children's novels and examines how urban life is depicted from the perspective of child-*flâneur* characters.[72]

These are just a few examples to demonstrate that scholarly discussions on the *flâneur* have extended to embrace the figure's multifarious perspectives and establish how the figure can be deployed as a concept to theorize a broad range of urban experiences.

Accordingly, this chapter begins by reviewing the history of theorization of the *flâneur* in cultural theory. Subsequently, the characteristics of the female counterpart of the figure, *flâneuse*, will be discussed.

Flânerie: A History of Walking

According to Elisabeth Wilson, the *flâneur* first appeared in an anonymous French pamphlet from 1804.[73] The pamphlet describes a day in the life of M. Bonhomme, characterized by his lack of financial needs and family responsibilities, allowing him to spend most of his time walking in Paris. Later, the figure continued its literary existence and appeared in another series of French pamphlets entitled Physiologie.[74] The figure of the *flâneur* was a recurrent theme in the pamphlet's sketches: depicted and described as a Parisian character with an avid curiosity about the urban culture of Paris. It is noteworthy that no particular occupation was noted for the *flâneur* in the pamphlets. Therefore, only his urban

[70] Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[71] Tom McDonough, "The Crimes of the Flaneur," *October* 10 (2002), 101.

[72] Eric L Tribunella, "Children's Literature and the Child Flâneur," *Children's Literature* 38, no. 1 (2010), 29.

[73] Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur," *New Left Review* 191 (February 1992), 94.

[74] *Physiologie* pamphlets were published in Paris between 1840 and 1845, and they were pocket-size volumes that contained satirical short stories, essays, poems, and illustrations about different social types and professions. Many famous writers and illustrators of the time, such as Honoré de Balzac, contributed to the publication of *Physiologie*. Walter Benjamin coined the term *Panoramic literature* to describe these types of literary work, as they, like a panorama, offered a broad perspective to analyze social types and different aspects of public life. For a comprehensive analysis of how the Physiologies reflected the cultural characteristics of the Parisian society, see: Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

roaming distinguished him from other city inhabitants: "before crossing the threshold of his door, the *flâneur* is a man like any other: a retired general, a professor emeritus, a former lawyer, a diplomat on halfpay. The moment he touches the ground of the pavement, [...], he enters into action and it is there that we seize his figure."[75] The external appearance of the comical figure in these sketches, furthermore, alludes to the bourgeoisie background of the *flâneur*—he always wears a top hat, is dressed in a formal black frock coat, and holds an elegant walking stick or umbrella, which is less of an assistive device and more of a fashionable choice. This appearance is notably discernable in a pamphlet entitled Physiologie du *flâneur* written by French writer and journalist Louis Huart.


Physiologie

DU FLANEUR.

PAR

M. Louis Huart.

VIGNETTES

De MM. Alophe, Daumier et Maurisset.

PARIS,

AUBERT ET Cie, Galerie Véro-Dodat. LAVIGNE, Rue du Paon-St-André, 5.

1841.

A. 10605

Figure 5. The Title Page of Louis Huart's Physiologie du *flâneur* [76]

The journey of the *flâneur* in Parisian streets was consecutively followed by Charles Baudelaire, especially in his famous collection of essays, The painter of modern life. In these essays, he describes the characteristics of an urban observer/philosopher who captures the rapid changes of modernity by being the "painter of the passing moment."[77] The figure epitomizes Baudelaire's idea of the artist of modern life, a curious observer "(whose) passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd." [78]

[75] Mary Gluck, "The Flâneur and the Aesthetic: Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-Century Paris," *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 5 (October 2003), 55.

[76] Louis Huart, *Physiologie du flâneur* (Paris: Aubert et Lavigne, 1841), 4.

[77] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, 2nd ed, Art & Letters (London: Phaidon, 1995), 5.

[78] Ibid., 9.

For Baudelaire, the *flâneur* feels at home "in the heart of the multitude" and within a crowd.[79] As a curious urban observer, whose main occupation is narrating the modern metropolitan life, the *flâneur* explores "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immovable."[80] However, Baudelaire's writings on the *flâneur* occasionally offer paradoxical characterizations, as his *flâneur* is continuously on the verge of "social involvement and social alienation."[81] In other words, he is a member of the crowd and simultaneously hidden from it.

The Baudelairean figure of the *flâneur* was subsequently interpreted and theorized by Walter Benjamin. He approached the figure as a cultural icon and brought the term to academia. Through his critical analysis of the figure, the *flâneur* was regarded as a methodological approach to study modernity and urban culture. In The Arcades Project, he examines the influence of modern urban society on the human psyche. In this respect, the motif of the *flâneur* was a methodological approach for Benjamin to study the metropolis, defining the figure as a streetwalker, a gentleman who wanders through the Parisian arcades.

Although Benjamin's writing on the *flâneur* provides invaluable insights into analyzing urban life and modern subjectivity, they do not offer a consistent theoretical definition of the *flâneur*: "[a]lthough Benjamin refers to his "theory" of the *Flâneur*, it is difficult to discern anything like a coherent single theory in the various ideas which cluster around that composite and over-determined figure."[82] This view is also supported by Deborah Parsons, arguing that Benjamin's description of the *flaîneur* changed over the thirteen years that he wrote about the concept: his *flâneur* was initially conceived as a city-dweller who wandered in streets and was fascinated by the crowd. Parsons defines this conceptualization of the figure as the "man of the crowd," suggesting that it transforms in Benjamin's later work to become the "man at the window": a middle-class urban observer who does not feel at ease within the crowd any longer, and instead, he feels threatened by the various stimulations presented to him by the modern city.[83] Therefore, he prefers to retreat to a scopic authoritative view of the city, becoming a detached, immobile observant figure. In doing so, he tries to regain individual control over the city that is frighteningly in turmoil.[84]

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[79] Baudelaire is confident that the figure is male. Parsons, however, highlights the mysterious figure of the Passante (or prostitute) in Baudelaire's poems. She suggests that although Baudelaire never accepted the female counterpart of the urban observer, the female figure had existed in his poems, wandering the Parisian streets. For a detailed analysis of how gender and femininity are depicted in Baudelaire's urban poems, see: Ronjaunee Chatterjee, "Baudelaire and Feminine Singularity," *French Studies* 70, no. 1 (January 2016): 17–32.

[80] Baudelaire, *The painter of modern life,* 403.

[81] Meaghan Malone, "Whoring the Flâneur: Re-Visioning the American Woman of the Town," *Web Memorial University Libraries- Electronic Journals* 2 (2012), 83.

[82] John Rignall, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator*, Routledge Revivals (Routledge, 2014), 9.

[83] Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis,* 34.

[84] Ibid.

The act of flânerie, nevertheless, is intertwined with narrating urban observations. In this respect, the aforesaid scopic authority of the *flâneur* is associated with textualizing the experience. The *flâneur*, consecutively, reads the city by his steps and re-writes the city through his own words. In other words, the *flâneur* is not only an "observer" but also a "producer of literary texts."[85] In this regard, the transition of the figure from a solely observant to the author-*flâneur* was the stepping stone to its usage as a "methodological persona."[86] As such, the figure offered urban researchers and literary critics the flânerie methodology to study urban texts: "[flânerie] becomes a way of reading urban texts, a methodology for uncovering the traces of social meaning that are embedded in the layered fabric of the city." [87]

Another critical point regarding *flâneurial* observation is its all-encompassing temporal spectrum, which takes into account the city's present state and the past. In this respect, the city façade for the *flâneur* is a palimpsest through which he reads former urban conditions. According to Benjamin, streets evoke a sense of timelessness in the *flâneur*, dragging him to a historical period that is not his own yet accessible to him through his strolls in the city:

> The street conducts the *Flâneur* into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward—if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private...In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance. The gaslight that streams down on the paving stones throws an equivocal light on this double ground.[88]

Through his wonderings and wanderings, the *flâneur* can grasp the seemingly ungraspable urban history and urban culture. The streets guide him to a spatio-temporal point where he can read the city's history. Accordingly, the city, for the *flâneur*, is a multi-layered space; every pathway or corner can summon the curious urban stroller to explore and narrate. Therefore, the private memory of the *flâneur* is based on and reflects upon the city's public memory. His observations are not merely an individual venture but rather an act of recalling and recording the city's memory. In this respect, through *flâneur*'s mappings of the city, the relationship between historical changes, power relations, and spatial arrangements is revealed. This issue, in turn, gives the figure a political nature: he is not necessarily an activist, but he exists to walk, observe and tell, and thus, politicized streets turn the seemingly indifferent *flâneur* into an essentially political figure. Hence, when the *flâneur*s of a city have experienced marginalization, the political

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[85] David Frisby, "The Flâneur in Social Theory," in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 83.

[86] Ibid., 81.

[87] Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures*, Issues in Cultural and Media Studies (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), 63.

[88] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, first paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 416.

nature of the act of flânerie becomes more pressing, as their observation are also accounts of urban exclusion. In this regard, observations of the female counterpart of the *flâneur*, or *flâneuse*, provide a significant opportunity to examine the history of women's exclusion in male-dominated urban environments.

In the following section, I will discuss the characteristics of the *flâneuse*, who is as paradoxical as the *flâneur* and has everything and nothing in common with her male counterpart.

Female Urban Wanderers: How to Define the *Flâneuse*?

As explained earlier, it was predominantly assumed that the *flâneur* is a bourgeois male who leads a luxurious life, the privilege of which allows him to stroll the streets for leisure. The masculine characterization of the figure was also adopted by some feminist critics, as they denied the existence of the female equivalent of the *flâneur*.[89] Pollock, for instance, argues that due to the sexual divisions of the 19th century, the act of flânerie was not possible for women.[90] Similarly, Wolff asserts that even though women participated in urban life during the 19th century by window-shopping or visiting department stores, these experiences cannot be considered an act of flânerie, as these shopping-oriented strolls were an extension of the activities attributed to the domestic (or private) sphere that women were mostly limited to at the time.[91]

The intricate relationship between women and cities is accountable for the aforementioned debates about the female *flâneur*. The widespread urbanization accompanied economic growth and social progress, yet it also presented new challenges for women. For decades, women's presence in the cities was considered to be problematic: it was assumed that the unlimited possibilities offered by urban life could result in decadence and depravity for women. Moreover, the characteristics of urban design, such as narrow streets, situated women in a vulnerable position regarding their urban experiences. In this sense, some streets were considered to be unsafe for a respectable female citizen: a woman who was excessively curious about her city, and was regularly roaming the streets, jeopardized her reputation as a decent woman, as she could be mistaken for a prostitute. By

[89] Janet Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse. Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (November 1985): 37–46; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988).

[90] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988), 71.

[91] Wolff, "The Invisible Flâneuse. Women and the Literature of Modernity." 37; it is important to note that Wolff does not valorize public life in the urban environment over women's domestic life. She argues that male authors mainly wrote the literature of modernity. As a result, "modern" has been primarily equivalent to the public sphere in these texts. In other words, Wolff suggests that the female experience of modernity taking place within the domestic sphere was rarely recognized by the modernist authors and consecutively was not studied by scholars.

imposing moral geography, the urban culture limited women's mobility, and resulted in a long history of gender inequality in urban environments. Because of this, the existence of the female urban wanderer, or the *flâneuse*, was denied.

To challenge this ubiquitous masculine connotation of the *flâneur*, Deborah Parsons suggests that we must distinguish the figure of the *flâneur*, as a conceptual term in the 20th century and the socio-historical phenomenon in the 19th century. She argues that Wolff and Pollock merely considered the *flâneur* a socio-historical figure, neglecting its latter conceptualization as a "metaphor for the artist" and a "style of observation adapted to the modern city."[92] Therefore, they failed to acknowledge the existence of the *flâneuse*. Outlining that through the metaphorical figure of the *flâneuse*, the female experience of the cities can be studied, Parsons points out that Wolff and Pollock's theories on the social presence of women in cities overlook the "evidence of possibilities for female freedom in the city streets." [93]

More recently, Lauren Elkin also reflected on this topic in her book about the *flâneuse*, examining urban trajectories of different figures of the *flâneuse* by analyzing the work of female writers and artists such as George Sand, Sophie Calle, and Agnès Varda. Elkin claims that women's experiences of the city are distinctive in the sense that they are affected by underlying socio-cultural context: "to suggest that there couldn't be a female version of the *flâneur* is to limit the ways women have interacted with the city to the ways men have interacted with the city." [94]

Female flânerie, therefore, always existed, although it appeared in different practices and modes of engagement. Elisabeth Wilson, for example, argues that female sex workers can be regarded as the figure of the *flâneuse*. Acknowledging that this perspective should not lead to romanticizing the condition of prostitutes, Wilson argues that these women and their presence in the city were a manifestation of public women during the 19th century, the *flâneuse*s of the time.[95] Deborah Parsons, likewise, mentions George Sand, a female novelist in the 19th century, as an example of the *flâneuse*, as she disguised herself in men's clothing to be able to wander around the streets of Paris with more liberty. To mention another example, Anne Friedberg traces back the first manifestation of female flânerie to the shopping malls during the 1850s and 1860s. While she admits that the female shoppers did not possess the freedom of the *flâneur* in their urban adventures, their presence was nonetheless the first instance of female engagement with public urban life.[96]

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[92] Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 40.

[93] Ibid., 40.

[94] Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse,* 11.

[95] Wilson, "The Invisible *Flâneur*," 92.

[96] Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

The elusive nature of the figures of *flâneur* and *flâneuse*, stemming from their flexibility to take different shapes, is one of the reasons that the figure can be used as a cultural concept. Although the figure has initially theorized based on actual male individuals, mostly privileged Parisian urbanists of the late 18th century, it has never been a traceable historical phenomenon. The figure, thus, has become an urban methodology, a cultural icon, and has been re-articulated countless times. Because of this, any attempt to restrict the figure and define it with a specific gender, social class, or nationality is misleading. The *flâneuse/flâneur* is the urban myth, a cultural concept, a framework through which the experiences and struggles of the urbanite can be recorded and eventually validated. As Rob Shields puts it: "Flânerie was therefore always as much mythic as it was actual. It has something of the quality of oral tradition and bizarre urban myth".[97]

Given the aforementioned theorizations, the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* have never ceased to evolve and adapt. They are hidden from the crowd and are also from the crowd. They stroll on the streets alone, yet their act of flânerie is collective, as their report also takes into account the experiences of the ones who are unable or unwilling to narrate. Accordingly, the figure has never referred to a person or an individual. The *flâneuse/flâneur* is a collective aspiration of the public who are amazed by yet anxious about modern life. As long as there are cities, there would be *flâneur*s and *flâneuse*s—roaming the streets, ready to observe, report and document.

In this next section, I will explore another aspect of urban experience that is also about city inhabitants' aspiration to participate in the urban public space. This concept, however, is first and foremost associated with the power dynamics in an urban environment.

The Right to The City: Conception of an Alternative City

In 2010, the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat) held the fifth session of the World Urban Forum in Brazil, introducing the concept of The Right to the City as its core theme. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's theorization of the concept, the forum concluded that reducing the urban divide necessitates implementing inclusive policies through which cities' sustainability, justice, and democratic governance can be accomplished.[98] It was not the first time Lefebvre's influential concept was used outside academia. Since its inception more than five decades ago, the notion of the Right to the City has received much attention from international organizations, political campaigns, and grassroots

[97] Rob Shields, "Fancy Footwork," in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 62.

[98] UN-HABITAT, "The Right to the City: Bridging the Urban Divide" (United Nations, 2010).

activists.[99] In the following section, I will offer a brief overview of the history of theorization of the Right to the City, and afterward, I discuss the current debates around the concept.

History of the Concept

Henri Lefebvre originally outlined his idea of the Right to the city in a treatise with the same title, *Le Droit à la ville*, during the tumultuous years of the late 1960s.[100] As a Marxist philosopher, Lefebvre argues that all city inhabitants have the right to participate in the production of the urban space in which they inhabit. By production, Lefebvre considered not only the physical features of an urban environment but also the social, political, and cultural aspects. Since cities are built upon and function based on citizens' labor, their Right to the City "is like a cry, and demand cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life."[101] Hence, the Right to the City is a "superior form of rights." It entails "the right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit."[102]

In Lefebvre's view, cities are places in which wealth, knowledge (*connaissances*), or techniques are accumulated.[103] Additionally, he argues that "the city is itself oeuvre, a feature that contrasts with the irreversible tendency towards money and commerce, towards exchange and product. They do not only contain monuments and institutional headquarters, but also spaces appropriated for entertainments, parades, promenades, festivities."[104]

Lefebvre's notion of oeuvre implies that cities are, or should be, more than a functional space in which inhabitants are gathered due to economic convenience. Urban planning, therefore, is required to be based on developing and improving a cityscape whose street "is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder.... This disorder is alive. It informs."[105] Lefebvre argues that in the capitalistic city, the dominance of exchange value spaces (*Tauschwert*), which he defines as "spaces bought and sold, the consumption of products, goods, places, and signs," has led to the reduction of use value spaces (*Gebrauchswert*), which refers to the

[99] Christian Schmid, "Henri Lefebvre, the Right to the City, and the New Metropolitan Mainstream," in *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*, ed. Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 42–62.

[100] Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à La Ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

[101] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

[102] Ibid., 174.

[103] Ibid., 66.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 18.

social aspect of an urban environment.[106] In this sense, the city becomes a product, "a living space rather than a sterile monotony of function over fun, exchange over use value, profit over people."[107]

Debates about the Concept

As mentioned above, the concept of the Right to the City attracted considerable attention in and outside academia due to its captivating title and inherently humane perspective on municipal affairs.[108] Nevertheless, discussing what can be defined as the Right to the City can lead to never-ending arguments: it is not easy to decide what kinds of urban policies should be implanted to secure achieving Lefebvre's urban ideals.

In this respect, Peter Marcuse points out: "[t]he right to the city is both an immediately understandable and intuitively compelling slogan, and a theoretically complex and provocative formulation."[109] In order to shed some light on the over-theorized concept, Marcuse raises two specific questions: whose right? And, what right? Addressing the first question, he argues that the quest for obtaining the right to the city belongs mainly to two groups: the ones who are deprived, and "even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled," and the citizens who aspire for a better urban environment in which "their opportunities for creative activity" are more recognized.[110] Marcuse answers the second question, arguing that the right, in this respect, is a collective right that embraces but goes beyond individual rights. It is "a right in a political sense" intending to develop a city where the "potential benefits of an urban life can be fully and entirely realized."[111]

It is also important to note that Lefebvre's concept is complemented by the theorization of other urban geographers and critics, for example, David Harvey, a British Marxist geographer. He argues that the perpetuation of capitalism is dependent on and is strengthened by urban processes and states that the Right to the City is a collective right. For Harvey, the Right to the city is the "democratic

[106] Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 87.

[107] Andrzej Zieleniec, "Lefebvre's Politics of Space: Planning the Urban as Oeuvre," *Urban Planning* 3, no. 3 (June 12, 2018), 5.

[108] In order to review some discussions about the concept, see: Harvey, "The Right to the City."; Mayer, "The 'Right to the City' in the Context of Shifting Mottos of Urban Social Movements."; Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, Dikeç, "Police, Politics, and the Right to the City."; Attoh, "What Kind of Right Is the Right to the City?" Mitchell, *The Right to the City;* Marcuse, "From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City."; Purcell, "Possible Worlds."

[109] Peter Marcuse, "From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City," *City* 13, no. 2–3 (June 2009), 189.

[110] Ibid., 190.

[111] Peter Marcuse, "Whose Right(s) to What City?," in *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*, ed. Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer (London ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 34.

management over the distribution of urban surpluses."[112]. Harvey, furthermore, argues that the Lefebvre's concept is about a struggle against anti-capitalistic urbanization. It demands a radical change to establish "greater democratic control over the production and utilization of the surplus."[113] Therefore, based on Harvey's argument, the concept is both a political as well as an economic claim to secure the rights of the underprivileged of a society: "to claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamental and radical way."[114]

Edward Soja is another scholar who conceptualizes the concept further by analyzing how social injustice can be generated or strengthened by spatially-induced power relations. The relationship between space and social productions, or "socio-spatial dialectic" in Soja's parlance, is considered non-discriminatory when it "involves the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially-valued resources and the opportunities to use them."[115] It is also worth noting that both Harvey and Soja played a vital role in introducing the concept in the English-speaking academic environment.[116]

Putting aside the frequent theorizations of Lefebvre's idea, which has led to, as Purcell calls it, a "conceptual bloating," the term was initially used by Lefebvre to present his notion of an idealized urban condition, an alternative to the status quo.[117] Lefebvre aimed to draw our attention to the possible future cities that have few similarities to the present-day urban conditions. Lefebvre's plan, to put it in his exact words, was to turn the existing urbanization upside down: "to the extent that the contours of the future city can be outlined, it could be defined by imagining the reversal of the current situation, by pushing to its limits the converted image of the world upside down."[118] Accordingly, and at the center of this concept, lies a cry and demand for fundamental political, social, and economic transformations of cities. In this sense, the Right to the City is not "claiming more access to and control over the existing capitalist city, a bigger slice of the existing pie. Instead, it is a movement to go beyond the existing city, to cultivate the urban so that it can grow and spread."[119]

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[112] Kafui A. Attoh, "What Kind of Right Is the Right to the City?," *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 5 (2011), 676.

[113] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review*, no. 53 (2008): 37.

[114] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2012), 2.

[115] Edward Soja, "The City and Spatial Justice," in *Justice et Injustices Spatiales*, ed. Bernard Bret et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2010), 57.

[116] Peter Saunders, *Social Theory and the Urban Question* (London: Routledge, 2003), 105.

[117] Mark Purcell, "Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36, no. 1 (February 2014): 141–54.

[118] Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 172.

[119] Purcell, "Possible Worlds," 150.

Considering the views presented above, it is no wonder that some scholars have been critical of the concept and question if implementing urban initiatives based on the concept of the Right to the City is feasible. However, as Mark Purell indicates, the most important matter is to consider the urban as a "possible world," which "is in part something in the future, an imagined society that is yet to come." This perception will help us to create and to move towards "a possible urban world."[120]

It is precisely due to this imaginative aspect of the concept that I argue fictional texts' representation of the subject is a critical contribution to envisioning the possible urban to which Lefebvre referred.[121] As a radical concept, an effort to "collectively create a pleasurable and festive urban life," it is worth investigating how and in what way the existing city alienated some inhabitants and how these exclusionary dynamics are perceived by the marginalized.[122]

As will be discussed in this study, the social aspect of urban life plays a vital role in all the novels in the corpus of this study. Based on the theories above and other related conceptualizations of Lefebvre's idea, I will seek to examine how this theme is configured in the novels chosen for this study. The main questions would be: what is the possible Tehran? What characteristics do Iranian female authors ascribe to it? And, what does it contain that the existing Tehran lacks?

In the following section, I will look at the individual's relationship with their surroundings and explore the interconnectedness of narrative space and identity formation, which is the main theme of the fifth chapter of the book.

Narrative Space and Identity

The issue of identity, initially discussed in psychological scholarship, has been approached differently over the past few decades. The existing definitions of the concept of identity mainly consider it as a socially constructed self-image that an individual develops throughout his/her life.[123] Additionally, interdisciplinary manifestations of the concept offer a wide range of perspectives on how an individual's sense of self is constructed in relation to the underlying social, political and cultural context.[124] Of late, most significantly, particular attention is paid to

[120] Ibid., 151 & 152.

[121] A recent example in this regard, placing the concept of *the Right to the City* at the center of a literary analysis, is the doctoral dissertation of Buket Cengiz in which she investigates how Lefebvre's concept is explored in the Turkish novels with the theme of rural to urban migration, see: Cengiz N. Buket, Right to the City Novels in Turkish literature from the 1960s to the Present, Literary Urban Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021).

[122] Joaquin Villanueva, "Rights," in *Urban Theory: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Mark Jayne and Kevin Ward (London; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 264.

[123] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 194.

[124] For a detailed overview of the development of the concept of identity in various disciplines, see: Peter J Burke and Jan E Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University

the identity-shaping capacity of the surrounding physical environment. In this sense, it is argued that human beings' self-perception is affected by their sense of (non)belonging to specific places; how they feel when they occupy a particular place, if they attribute meanings and memories to the physical setting, or if their behavior changes once they leave a place.[125]

Most recently, there has been a growing interest in examining different aspects of identity formation in literary narratives. This interest is paralleled by a relatively novel psychological approach to identity, arguing that an individual's sense of self is narratively constructed.[126] In this regard, it is argued that individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their identities based on the stories they tell themselves and others.[127] It is important to highlight that "one's life story for as long as one is alive" is inevitably incomplete, as the individual continuously adjusts the recounted narrative "to accommodate and reconcile, if necessary, the self whose actions have already been committed with the self who makes plans for future action."[128] In literary narratives, however, a "sense of an ending" is communicated, offering the reader an all-encompassing idea about the identity formation of characters.[129]

These three aspects of identity formation—narrativity, spatiality, and its relation with a literary text—are essential for my study of characters' sense of identity and belonging to the urban setting. As discussed, several definitions and theorizations of the concept of identity have been proposed. Nevertheless, in this study, I will draw on the theory of identity construction proposed by Dan P. McAdams, an American scholar focusing on narrative psychology. Accordingly, I will discuss how the protagonists of the assessed novels relate to or are affected by the urban condition of Tehran. McAdams' theory is beneficial to my analysis, as it conceives the identity as a process through which individuals' self-understanding

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Press, 2009); Leonie Huddy, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory," *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (March 2001): 127–56; Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2000): 284.

[125] Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, "Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, no. 1 (March 1983): 57–83.

[126] Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity," in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2011), 99–115.

[127] For a general outlook on different theories concerning narrative identity, see: Kate C. McLean, "The Emergence of Narrative Identity: Narrative Identity," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 4 (July 2008): 1685–1702.

[128] Andreea D. Ritivoi, "Identity and Narrative," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 231–35.

[129] Guri Ellen Barstad, Karen Patrick Knutsen, and Elin Nesje Vestli, *Exploring Identity in Literature and Life Stories: The Elusive Self* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019).

ceaselessly changes based on different experiences. To this end, McAdams' theoretical framework concerning identity formation would usefully supplement the discussions regarding how the protagonists' identities are founded as co-constructs of their self-conceptions and the surrounding spatial elements.

The following part of this chapter explores in greater detail the theory of identity construction. I will discuss how narrative space is categorized, and to what extent the representation of space can be related to characters' subjectivity. In chapter five, consequently, I will merge these two concepts to analyze the reciprocal relationship between characters' identity formation and urban public space.

McAdams' Narrative Framework of Identity

As briefly explained earlier, McAdams' theory of identity construction, life story, is based on the assumption that an individual's identity is narratively constructed.[130] Following William James' theory of I-me configuration, McAdams distinguishes between "I," as the subjective process of constructing a narrative self, and "Me," which is the object of the I-process. In other words, the "I" observes and configures the "Me" as the product of the observation process. McAdams calls the I-process selfing, arguing that although a fragmented "I" can be considered a sign of a severe mental illness, for instance, multiple personality disorder, the constructed "Me" should not necessarily be unified. Since the "I" attributes, throughout the selfing process, "autobiographical events" to the "Me," it is possible that different events in different stages of life construct integrative or, at times, disintegrative selves.[131] In this respect, McAdams' theory accounts for various changes that occur in an individual's life, and affect how a person conceives his/her identity. Since an individual's life story constantly evolves, an integrative self would be comprised of a harmonious connection between the present and the past self. It is important to note that although one's understanding of his/her identity might at times, as mentioned above, lead to a disintegrative self, the most crucial factor in order to maintain psychological health is that an individual's self-conceptions (or life stories) would be meaningful and purposeful within the particular culture they are situated. Another vital factor in McAdams's theorization of identity, which will also be applicable in discussing literary texts in this study, is that he underlines the act of diary or autobiographic writing is helpful in the process of identity formation. Writing a diary, as McAdams argues, can offer individuals a sense of "healing and growth," and help them to construct

[130] Dan P. McAdams, "The Case for Unity in the (Post)Modern Self: A Modest Proposal," in *Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues*, ed. Richard D. Ashmore and Lee J. Jussim, Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity, v. 1 (Rutgers Symposium on Self and Social Identity, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 46–78.

[131] McAdams, "Narrative Identity," 104.

"integrative self-narratives."[132] The autobiographic dimension of the selfing process will play an important role in the analysis in the fifth chapter, as both protagonists take a reflective position on themselves and their identity formation. In Aqa'i's novel, *Az sheytan*, the entire story is narrated through the process of the diary writing of the protagonist, and in Salar's novel, the narrator's memories are frequently recounted and reviewed by the character. I will thoroughly explore this issue and consider if it is associated with the characters' relationship with their physical surroundings.

Categories of Narrative Space

In its general sense, space is reflected in literary fiction in various ways: it can be the physical environment described by the narrator or the manifestation of a fantasy, a place about which characters dream and for which they long. Space can also be represented through symbolic implications and indicate the emotional state of characters. In this respect, although narrative space is a major area of interest in today's literary studies, its significance was for a long time neglected, as literary criticism favored theorization of the narrative element of time over space; arguing that narrative texts were predominantly temporal accounts and space is merely a static background.[133] Nevertheless, with a growing interest in investigating space as an analytical concept in social and human science, a trend often recognized as spatial turn, examining the production of space in narrative texts has become a significant object of research in literary studies.[134]

To this end, the intersection of narratological study and geography has resulted in studies focused on spatial articulations of literary texts. In this study, I will deploy the framework of Marie-Laure Ryan, a literary and narrative scholar. She categorizes five layers of narrative space, exploring how the element of space can shape the plot.[135] In this respect, the first category defined by Ryan is spatial frames, which are the "immediate surrounding of actual events."[136] They are spe-

[132] Dan P McAdams, *Art and Science of Personality Development*. (New York: Guilford Publications, 2018), 240.

[133] Sabine Buchholz and Jahn Manfred, "Space in Narrative," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 552.

[134] For a detailed survey of the spatial turn's impact as movement on different disciplines, including literary studies, see: Barney Warf, ed., *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Routledge Studies in Human Geography 26 (London: Routledge, 2014).

[135] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Space," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Hühn, Peter et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2020).

[136] Ibid., paragraph 6.

cific places where characters inhabit and are characterized and conveyed by describing the individual objects they contain.[137] For instance, if a character narrates in the spatial frame of a living room, describing a coach, a dinner table, or television are hints through which the reader can realize that the immediate setting of this section of the narrative is a living room. The next level is called setting, which refers to the general "socio-historico-geographic" context in which the narrative takes place.[138] Generally, this level remains unaltered throughout the narrative. In this research project, the setting of all the novels under analysis is Tehran from the 1990s to the 2010s. The following category, story space, involves the entire spatial frames and all the locations mentioned in the narrative—even if the characters imagine and never physically inhabit them. In other words, it is "the space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters."[139] Therefore, characters can contemplate, dream or imagine these spaces even if no particular events occur in them. For instance, a character drives her car and simultaneously reviews memories of an old trip to a beach; the car is the spatial frame, and the space of the beach is the story space. This category is fundamental in analyzing the novels in chapter five because both protagonists constantly fantasize about the places they formerly inhabited or childhood memories in their old hometown.

Conclusively, the last category defined by Ryan is narrative (story) world and refers to "the story space completed by the reader's imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge and real world experience."[140] Since reader-oriented discussions are beyond the scope of this study, I will not further explore different aspects of this particular layer of the narrative space in my analysis. These theoretical frameworks are points of departure through which urban spatial practices of characters are examined in this research. I will discuss how the authors of selected novels approached the public urban space of Tehran, and how their characters roam around, relate, and are affected by the surrounding space.

As explained in the introduction, the theoretical discussions in this study are not only comprised of these three concepts, as I will draw on other related theories from social science, human geography, and feminist studies to analyze the narratives. However, the concepts explored here are the central theoretical themes of the following chapters. Accordingly, the principal characteristic of the Iranian *flâneuse* will be discussed in the next chapter. Subsequently, I will discuss the concept of the Right to the City in chapter four, exploring how the authors represented the city inhabitants' yearning for an alternative Tehran. Finally, chapter six deals with the relationship between urban narrative space and the characters' process of identity formation.

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[137] Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth E. Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*, Theory and Interpretation of Narrative (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 24.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Ryan, "Space," paragraph 8.

[140] Ibid., paragraph 9.

Chapter III: Enduring City: *Flâneuse*s of Tehran

And so away he goes, hurrying, searching.
But searching for what?[141]

The growing academic interest in the figure of the *flâneur* and its development into a cultural concept to explore different modes of urban representation is partly related to the transformation of the figure itself. The figure was initially conceived as a masculine, leisured, and aloof urban wanderer. It has evolved, nevertheless, in the past decades, resisting classification to a specific gender, nationality, or social class. As extensively discussed in the theory chapter, this elusive nature of the figure has allowed its literary manifestations to document an expansive vista of urban experience. In this respect, the figure has been deployed as a methodology to read urban texts across time and space, exploring the modern urban experience.[142] The *flâneur*, accordingly, is a city chronicler whose wanderings disclose a city's past and whose urban sensibility takes into account nuances of the collective urban experience. Conceptualization of the female *flâneur*, or the *flâneuse*, furthermore, has expanded the figure in a way to document and uncover gender-based inequalities embedded in the social environment of cities.

In this respect, the figure of the urban wanderer, regardless of gender identity and socioeconomic status, is a cultural concept through which an overarching understanding of the urban condition can be gathered. In this chapter, I merely explore the urban observations of female characters and thereby delve into sketching the characteristics of the *flâneuse* in the context of Iranian society. Focusing on the *flâneuse*, in the following section, I will deploy feminine pronouns when I refer to the figure, as the urban experience of the *flâneur* will not be examined here.

This chapter, correspondingly, presents a textual analysis of the itineraries, observations, and contemplations of two Iranian literary *flâneuse*s. Examining the footsteps of two examples of the female urban wanderer in Mahsa Mohebbʿali's *Negaran nabash* (Don't Worry), and Sara Salar's *Ehtemelan gm shodehʾam* (I'm probably lost), this analysis will be set against the backdrop of the city's underlying sociopolitical conditions.[143] In doing so, I explore to what extent the *flâneuse* as a

[141] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, 2nd ed, Art & Letters (London: Phaidon, 1995), 12.

[142] Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures*, Issues in Cultural and Media Studies (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), 63; I have provided an extensive discussion on the development of the figure from being conceived as a male bourgeoisie to its conceptual configuration as a female urban wanderer in the second chapter, see: 31–39.

[143] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2008); Sara Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodehʾam* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2010); for a short biography of the authors and the reception of the novels, see the first chapter: pp 20–24.

literary figure is satisfied with, conflicted about, or opposed to different aspects of her urban surrounding.

Mahsa Mohebbʿali's novel, *Negaran nabash*, places the *flâneuse*/protagonist in the middle of an earthquake-stricken Tehran, whose chaos renders an unprecedented opportunity for the character to experience the city differently. In light of this, the specific aim of analyzing the defining characteristic of the *flâneuse* in *Negaran nabash* is to examine if the unusual state of the city obstructs her urban journey or, on the contrary, whether it assists her *flâneurial* observations. If the latter is the case, what does the *flâneuse* see, and how does she relate it to the usual city's normal condition?

The *flâneuse* of the other novel in focus, *Ehtemelan gom shodehʾam*, mainly experiences the city while driving, as she considers and recalls memories from her life. As such, her observation is the epitome of how personal memories of the urban wanderer are interwoven with public urban history. By taking into account that the *flâneuse* of this novel predominately witnesses the city from her car, ruminating over her memories, discussion about the narrative centers on two essential queries: if the activity of driving, in itself, provides characteristically-specific affordances in the construction of the Iranian version of the *flâneuse*, and secondly, to what extent individual memories of the protagonist are evoked by, or generally influenced by, the history of Tehran.

In the following section, I will analyze the narrative structure of both novels and then will focus more specifically on the formation of the *flâneuse* as a literary figure in these two specific narratives. Mohebbʿali and Salar's narratives will be analyzed further in later chapters of this book regarding other urban-related themes and concepts. Given that these novels are examined for the first time, the discussion will open with a plot summary. Thereafter, a general introduction about important narratological elements (e.g., characterization, syntax, setting, thematic patterning) and thematically relevant aspects of the stories to contemporary Iranian society will be presented, as these features are the basis for the subsequent analytical discussions. The end of this chapter will feature an elaboration on the literary articulation of the Iranian *flâneuse*: how the figure has been reconceptualized to reflect the poetics and politics of the present-day *Tehrani*an urban reality.

Mapping the City in Chaos in *Negaran nabash*

Plot Summary

The novel's protagonist is a young girl named Shadi who lives with her well-off family. The novel is set in the 2000s and begins with her family members' reaction to a powerful earthquake hitting Tehran a few minutes earlier. The eldest brother (Babak), towards whom Shadi holds a deep affection, is a rational and family-oriented character. Babak is keen on helping his mother (Nahid), as she desperately wants the family to leave the city. Conversely, the younger brother (Arash) is a spontaneous character, showing his genuine delight in the chaotic

situation by encouraging his friends to meet and reclaim the city. Their father is a university professor who is absent throughout the narrative, and due to his history of philandering, Nahid and Babak are convinced that he prefers to be with another woman at this critical time.

Shadi is an opium addict, and she has no intention of following his family's plan to leave the city. Instead, she escapes home to search the disordered city for drugs. From this point onward, the narrative follows Shadi's journey in the city, visiting various friends to look for her next fix. At her first stop, however, Shadi visits a suicidal friend named Ashkan, whose text messages in the morning have implied he might be contemplating taking his life; therefore, Shadi feels the necessity to check on him. Arriving at Ashkan's place, she finds him unconscious, having swallowed fatal doses of raw opium. After helping him, she leaves the apartment while Ashkan's dog, Crassus, follows Shadi as she wanders around the city. Shadi wants to meet another friend named Elham to ask for drugs. Elham is not at home, and the protagonist listens to the messages of a desperate man on Elham's answering machine, pleading with Elham to forgive his unfaithfulness.

At some point, the streets become more congested, and Shadi is caught in the crowd; several citizens are ambushed and brutally beaten by the police special force. The agitated city inhabitants, benefiting from the chaos, have marched to the street in protest to express their anger at the social and urban injustice experienced throughout the decades. The protagonist's grandmother is among the protestors, wearing a camouflage military uniform and screaming political slogans. Shadi realizes that the police are approaching her grandmother to arrest her, but she cannot move and help her as the flow of the crowd prevents her. Eventually, Shadi loses consciousness and subsequently wakes up among a group of youngsters who help her to regain her strength. They inform Shadi that they are also protesting, but their goal is more radical than others: they want to reclaim Tehran from the authorities. Shadi, nevertheless, feels somewhat confused about their demands and decides to continue her solo journey. A young group member then gives her a ride on his motorbike to visit her next destination: the apartment of a childhood friend named Sara. The two friends share an intimate moment while taking opium and talking about old memories. Simultaneously, Shadi thinks about her love for Sara and the physical pleasure she gets from being close to her. This ambiguously erotic moment lasts until Shadi and Sara fall into a calm stupor. Shadi wakes up and resumes her urban adventure. She accidentally meets an old friend of her mother, holding a megaphone while chanting revolutionary slogans. Shadi continues observing the volatile condition of the city. Afterward, she finds a quiet corner, smokes her last dose of opium, and instantly falls asleep. When she wakes up, it is already night, and the city appears peaceful. She walks down the street towards the main square and finds Arash, her younger brother. The siblings recount their experiences of the day as Arash gives Shadi a pill, introducing her to a new type of drug. She accepts the pill and slowly finds her way to the underground of the square. The drug gradually affects her body. Vacillating

between consciousness and unconsciousness, Shadi hears someone, from afar, singing a folkloric song.

Main Features

Mohebbʿali's novel is 146 pages long and is divided into nine chapters. The plot follows a linear, chronological order and the entirety of the narrative takes place within a day. Shadi is a homodiegetic narrator, and the story is entirely focalized through her perspective. Although her reports mainly concern the day's events, she occasionally reflects upon her memories and her relationship with other characters. The protagonist's name, Shadi, means "cheerfulness" in Persian, and this choice, in itself, subtly juxtaposes the character's predicaments and her general dissatisfaction with her current living circumstances.

Mohebbʿali stated in an interview that the first idea for the book came to mind when close to the Iranian New Year; she was walking around Tajrish Square, observing the hectic city. It suddenly crossed her mind what would happen if, at that instant, an earthquake hit Tehran.[144] She also recounts the memory of a night in 1998, as millions of Iranians poured onto the streets to celebrate the success of the national soccer team in the qualification games for The World Cup: the author describes her father's observation of the city as he envisaged a situation in which the inhabitants come to the street, albeit not for celebration, but rather to demonstrate frustration and fury. By writing *Negaran nabash*, Mohebbʿali tried to imagine such an unprecedented condition, and in order to grant her characters this hypothetical context, she sets her narrative during a day in which an earthquake struck Tehran early in the morning.

By choosing this form of natural disaster, the author also explores different aspects of a type of collective anxiety affecting the urbanites of Tehran through the past decades, namely, the fear of an impending earthquake. Tehran is located on a seismic belt, surrounded by several active faults that make the city among the most earthquake-prone areas worldwide.[145] Given the high population density and unprincipled growth of Tehran, especially numerous poor-quality construction in fault areas in recent years, the city is all the more vulnerable to a potential earthquake. After the Bam earthquake in 2003, in which nearly 30,000 people lost their lives in Kerman province, there was a growing concern among authorities regarding the possible damaging consequences of such a disaster in Tehran. Over the years, nationwide safety training courses have been designed for students in order to prepare them to respond to an earthquake. Likewise, mainstream media constantly broadcasts educational programs about disaster preparedness. These

[144] Mohebbʿali, Mahsa. Mahsa Mohebbʿali va tajrobe-ye neveshtan. Interview by Hamed Yusefi. BBC Persian, June 2014.

[145] Kamranzad, Farnaz, Hossein Memarian, and Mehdi Zare. "Earthquake Risk Assessment for Tehran, Iran." *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information* 9, no. 7 (July 9, 2020): 430.

precautionary measures, nevertheless, have not been sufficient, as stated by experts who frequently warn inhabitants and the authorities about the catastrophic outcomes of a possible earthquake in Tehran.[146]

As aforenoted, given the high seismic risk, residents of the Iranian capital city have lived with the looming threat of a potential earthquake. In *Negaran nabash*, the worst has ultimately happened: an earthquake hit Tehran, and its inhabitants confronted its dreadful outcomes. Interestingly, as will be discussed in this chapter, in the text, not all of Tehran perceives the city's new state as horrid. For some inhabitants, it is the day they can finally experience their city as they always desired. Shadi, the protagonist of the novel, is one of them.

The Assertive Gaze of the *Flâneuse*

In *Negaran nabash*, the protagonist mainly walks in the city, except for one occasion when she is given a ride on the motorcycle of a young protestor. Occasionally, the author mentions the exact whereabouts of her main character, but for the most part, she describes the setting, the landscape, and architecture, rather than revealing the names of the streets.

Based on the information provided in the narrative, Shadi's first reflection of the city is from an unspecified location on Shariʿati Street. After visiting other spots, such as Darband neighborhood and Evin district, the end of her journey is marked by spending the night at Saʿadat Abad square, located in the northwest of Tehran (Fig. 6).

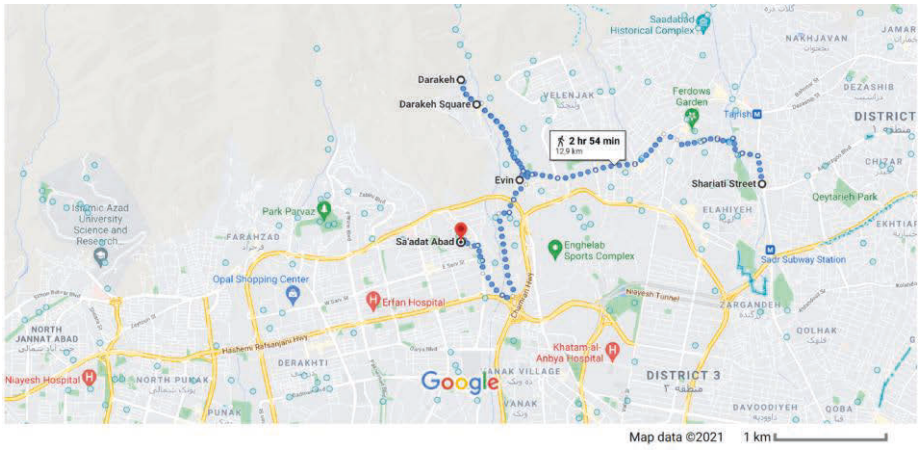

Figure 6. The Protagonist's Itinerary [147]

[146] Khabaronline. "Towsiyeh-ye yek mohandes-e zelzeleh: Az Tehran beravid," December 2017.

[147] "Directions for walking from *Shariʿati Street* to *Darakeh* and *Saʿadat Abad Square*," Google Maps, accessed August 24, 2021.

As shown on the map, the walking distance takes approximately 3 hours to complete. The story-time, however, is much longer, as Shadi stops at different locations to visit friends and look for drugs. It is important to note that while Shadi's primary motivation for wandering around the city is derived from a compulsive urge to find drugs, she does not miss a chance to observe the city and its agitated inhabitants. In this respect, Mohebbʿali's narrative unfolds in a manner that, at times, three or four consecutive pages are allocated to describe Tehran from Shadi's point of view.

Part of her probing curiosity about the city stems from this particular urban condition engendered by the aftereffects of the earthquake: the government is temporarily paralyzed and is incapable of maintaining authority over the city. This, in turn, has resulted in a power vacuum, a state of urban anarchy, rendering the citizen with an unexpected occasion to experience Tehran, unbound by regulations and order. As a result, Shadi is also emancipated from the city's customary restraints and navigates her surroundings with more liberty. For instance, upon leaving home and stepping into the street in the second chapter of the novel, the narrator takes note of the unusual state of the city:

> این همه آدم چرا ریخته‌اند توی خیابان شریعتی؟ انگار همه‌ی مردم دنیا توی این خیابان زندگی می‌کنند. جیغ هوار و فحش خواهر و مادر توی هوا چرخ می‌زند.
>
> Why have so many people poured out onto Shariʿati street? It is as if the entire world population lives here. Screaming, shouting, swearing, and curse words tarnishing mothers and sisters are spinning in the air.[148]

As illustrated above, the protagonist's first observation captures a city that is utterly in turmoil, and its anguished inhabitants are unnerved by the gravity of the crisis. The narrator emphasizes twice the significant size and vociferousness of the crowd, highlighting the fact that the urban populace differs from that of an ordinary day. The following paragraph of the novel addresses one of the essential predicaments of the figure of the *flâneuse* throughout history, most notably, being an object of pervasive and unwanted attention. In Shadi's case, some inhabitants, oblivious to the immediate commotion, become engrossed in Shadi's clothing style and outer appearance, which is not in accordance with societal regulations. In this regard, it is relevant to address the query: how the narrator looks, and what her outfit consists of that draws such scrutiny from other citizens?

At the beginning of the novel, as the protagonist describes her reflection in a mirror, she yields some information about her physical characteristics:

> تصویرم توی آینه جان می‌دهد برای کلوز آپ آدم‌های روانی: موهای کوتاه تیغ تیغی، صورت زرد، زیر چشم‌ها کبود.

[148] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 39.

> My mirror image is perfect for a close-up of crazy characters: short razor-sharp haircut, yellow face, blue circles under the eyes."[149]

In the above quote, the protagonist compares her image to a stereotypical portrayal of patients with mental illness in the media, implying that her appearance may not conform to socially acceptable standards.[150] Another important note regarding the protagonist's appearance is that through her description—the washed-out skin tone and the dark circle around eyes—it is suggested that her opium addiction is visible on her face. It is important to highlight the focalizer of the entire narrative is Shadi; thus, the reader cannot access other characters' perceptions of the protagonist. What the narrator/focalizer describes in the mirror is the image she has of herself, which might or might not be exaggerated or distorted.

The narrator, in another instance, briefly reports on the clothes she chooses to wear before leaving the house –an oversized overcoat and a black woolen beanie. Benefiting from the quasi-apocalyptic state of the city, Shadi does not comply with the mandatory hijab regulations in Iran and refuses to wear the customary headscarf. As discussed in the introduction, the issue of (un)veiling has a vital role in the social history of Iran. With its political nature, the regulation regarding the issue of hijab has been used to control the spatial practices of female bodies. It is, then, of critical importance to note that one of the first responses of the protagonist to the temporary freedom in the aftermath of the earthquake is not to wear the hijab and roam around the city in her preferred attire. Although the author never reveals if Shadi removes her hat throughout the action-packed day, the protagonist's appearance is all the more idiosyncratic for other citizens by the end of the novel.

In the final chapter, the narrator stands alongside women in a food distribution site queue. Shortly after, due to other women's critical attitude toward Shadi's appearance and their uncertainties regarding her gender identity, Shadi is forced to leave and stand in the men's queue. The imposed dislocation, however, does not relieve the protagonist, as the men nearby harass her, jeering and mocking her physical appearance.

This issue, the protagonist's purportedly inscrutable appearance, is brought up again in the narrative when some old men presume Shadi is a young boy and offer her a cup of tea.[151] The ambiguity of the narrator's gender identity is also foregrounded in the introductory excerpt of the English translation of the novel, introducing "gender binary" as one of the novel's central themes.[152] I will return to the critical role of the protagonist's presumed queer identity later in this

[149] Ibid., 16.

[150] For a detailed review of the stigmatizing effects of the stereotypical portrayal of mental illness in visual media, see: Pirkis et al., "On-Screen Portrayals of Mental Illness."

[151] Ibid., 136 & 139.

[152] "In Case of Emergency," The Feminist Press, accessed September 8, 2021.

chapter, elaborating on how this aspect of her characterization is formulated in the narrative and how Shadi's alienation from other inhabitants makes her a quintessential *Tehrani*an *flâneuse*.

Readdressing the protagonist's attention-enticing guise, the first person who notices Shadi's presence in the city is a man who stares and strides in her direction. The protagonist describes the man's hostile gaze as the irritated attitude of an old acquaintance who "has left numerous messages on your answering machine and you never replied to him."[153] Although the man passes by without harassing her further, Shadi is annoyed by his gaze. A similar encounter occurs a few paragraphs later when she meets a family of three whose members, especially the father, stare at her. While Shadi is unsettled, this time, she declines to be the object of the gaze:

> پسربچه‌ی ریقونه‌ای با مف آویزان و دهان به اندازه‌ی نعلبکی باز شده جلو پایم می‌ایستد و فریاد می‌کشد. پدر و مادرش برمی‌گردند، مثل اینکه یادشان رفته بوده بچه هم دارند، می‌ایستند و انگار من خاله یا عمه‌ی بچه باشم، طلبکار نگاهم می‌کنند. من هم طلبکار نگاهشان می‌کنم. پدر خانواده بچه را بغل می‌کند و توی جمعیت گم می‌شوند.[154]
>
> A scrawny little kid with snot hanging off his nose and a mouth stretched big as a saucer comes up to me, stops, and screams. His parents come back—forgot the kid?—and glare at me like I owe them something. What, I'm not some auntie. I glare back. The father scoops him up. They get lost in the crowd.[155]

This is the first instance of many throughout the narrative that Shadi asserts her gaze over the city and its citizens. The urban journey of the protagonist is, in other words, shaped by an emphasis on her gaze: how she holds it when she averts it and how she challenges to be positioned as its passive object.

The theme of the gaze becomes more important when considering one of the primary reasons that excluded women from being considered as the female counterpart of the *flâneur* was their lack of freedom to rewrite the city through their gaze. Since the privilege of gazing was conceived to belong to the male urban wanderers: "the gaze of the *flâneur* articulates and produces a masculine sexuality which in the modern sexual economy enjoys the freedom to look, appraise and possess."[156] Due to the dominance of the possessing gaze of male urban wanderers and the exclusionary stance regarding women's presence in cities, respectable female inhabitants presumably ought to limit their urban activities to very few safe neighborhoods. In this respect, the history of the relationship between women and cities is fraught with "moralizing and regulatory discourses" that limit the female urban experience to supposedly "safe" and "decent" city spaces,

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[153] Mohebb'ali, *Negaran nabash*, 39.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Mohebb'ali, *In Case of Emergency*, 26.

[156] Griselda Pollock, Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 112.

based on the assumption that it is only in this context women are able to protect themselves from being subordinated to the all-encompassing gaze of men.[157]

Accordingly, obtaining the advantage to gaze is one of the starting points of the flâneuse's journey, as the "one-way-ness and the directionality of the [male] gaze" rendered the female version of the *flâneur* impossible.[158] To speak of the figure of the *flâneuse*, in Anke Gleber's parlance, means to look for a "resistant gaze" that challenges the hitherto gendered norms of urban experience. In examining the figure of the *flâneuse* in visual narratives as well as actual social life, Gleber asserts that the *flâneuse* offers her own interpretation of urban life, and her gaze is "an alternative approach, and a subject position that stands in opposition to women's traditional and prevailing subsistence as an image on the screens and in the streets."[159]

In *Negaran nabash*, Shadi's first encounters in the city bring forward the dichotomous discourse of the male/female gaze. She describes bearers of the male gaze as individuals who (for no apparent reason) are irritated by her, as though they are an acquaintance of the protagonist, and she has neglected their attempts of contact—they demand something from her by gazing at her. The narrator's resistant gaze, nevertheless, implies her refusal to be the object of the gaze. Quite interestingly, Shadi's rigidity in maintaining her provocative stance impels other inhabitants to avert their gaze. Additionally, as the protagonist pursues the act of flânerie further, she is motivated to challenge the omnipresent male gaze to a greater extent:

> یورتمه می‌روم...هیچ‌کس نگاهم نمی‌کند، حتی آن پسر چشم و ابرو مشکی. نگاهم کن، مگر در عمرت چند تا آدم خل مثل من می‌توانی ببینی؟ دور تیر چراغ برق می‌چرخم، ازش اویزان می‌شوم[...] تیر چراغ برق را در آغوش می‌کشم. یورتمه می‌روم...چرخ می‌زنم و صورت به صورت پسر آفتاب‌سوخته‌ای می‌شوم. نیشش تا بناگوش باز می‌شود. لبخند می‌زنم و یورتمه می‌روم....امکان ندارد دنبالم بیاید و بتواند پیدایم کند.
>
> I'm sprinting... No one is looking at me, not even that boy with black eyes and eyebrows. Look at me; how many crazy people like me can you see in your life? I turn around the street light pole, I hang from it [...] I hug the light pole. I gallop... I spin and come face to face with a sunburned boy. He smiles widely. I smile and gallop....it is impossible for him to follow me and be able to find me.[160]

The rapture of whirling around the city illustrates the newfound liberty of the protagonist; not only is she hermetically indifferent toward being the object of a possible gaze, but she also calls for other people's attention. Once a young

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[157] Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur," *New Left Review* 191 (February 1992), 90.

[158] Doreen B. Massey, Space, Place and Gender, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 234.

[159] Anke Gleber, "Female Flanerie and the Symphony of the City," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 84.

[160] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 46.

boy notices the protagonist, she is not bothered in the least, as she is confident that the mayhem of the city will protect her.

In this paragraph, Mohebbʿali' distills the controverted dynamism of the male/female gaze as she grants her character the opportunity to proclaim the streets by demanding other citizens to look at her. This is also crucial in terms of character development and the articulation of the Iranian *flâneuse* in the novel, as Shadi changes from one who is even disturbed by her own image in the mirror, feeling discomfort when others look at her, to someone who wants to be looked at in an assertive and joyful manner. The transformation is all the while enabled by the city and the character's unobstructed movement in its streets. At this point, the female protagonist is not encumbered by the inhabitants' gaze. Inviting others to look at her, the *flâneuse*/protagonist thereby reverses the power dynamic of the male/female gaze—she detracts the urban crowd from their power over her as she declares their unwanted attention will not unsettle her. Consequently, given "the empowered position of the male gaze" limited women's presence in the cities for decades, when Shadi is not bound by this restraint, the city is hers to discover.[161]

On a semantic level, the protagonist's description of her bodily movement accentuates a new mode of female autonomy in regard to the spatial decorum of Iranian urban space. The narrator deploys, on several occasions, the verb "yurtme raftan" to describe her movements. In Persian, the verb refers to the gait of a quadruped, in which a front hoof and the opposite back hoof move together. It is also, less prevalently, used to describe an individual's hasty body movements. In the above passage, the reiteration of this verb associates the protagonist's euphoric movement with the swift gallop of a horse, which suggests notions such as freedom and emancipation.

The protagonist's blasé attitude, and her indifference towards being under the scrutiny of others' attention, is once again emphasized, later in the novel, when the narrator washes her hand in a water stream and notices a group of taxi drivers staring at her:

> حالا همه‌شان با هم دارند نگاهم می‌کنند و زیر لب پچ‌پچ می‌کنند. جلو اورکتم را هم مثلا با آب می‌شویم. این قدر نگاه کنید تا چشم‌هایتان دربیاید.
>
> Now they are all looking at me and whispering under their breath. I pretend to wash the front of my overcoat with water. Look so much so that your eyes pop out.[162]

The ironic phrase "so that your eyes pop out" is used in the Persian language to indicate that one has proven another wrong by defeating them or by being successful at something against all odds. In this context, it highlights the protagonist's hyperbolic usage of the phrase as she boldly confronts the voyeuristic

[161] Gleber, "Female Flânerie and the Symphony of the City," 75.

[162] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 134.

attitude of the men who gaze at her. In the above quote, furthermore, the protagonist maintains her nonchalant attitude about the gaze directed toward her. Accordingly, Shadi's unabated refusal to be the object of the gaze is one of the focal points of her urban adventure as a *flâneuse*, as her wanderings are unimpeded by interference or harassment.

Although assertive, the resistant gaze of the narrator/*flâneuse* is not merely a confrontational approach to pave the way for her flânerie expedition. The author textualizes Shadi's gaze to present an "alternative approach" to understanding the urbanite of Tehran: she earnestly aims to maintain her *flâneurial* inspection of the city; thus, she is in search of a site better suited for observing and reporting urban sceneries. In other words, Shadi is aware of her witness to a significant event in the urban history of Tehran, and as such, she wants to observe as much as she can and do justice to her documentary commitment as a *flâneuse*. The protagonist, moreover, relishes the situation and finds ways to add her own particular reading of the city to the observations.

This is best captured in passages where the protagonist stops walking and pursues a higher spatial position to have a better view of the city. Due to the throes of the protests and the city's intense conflict, Shadi is unable to be the attentive spectator she desires to be. Therefore, she seeks a higher position by climbing up the fountain square, as this elevated standpoint gives her an extended range of vision. Once satisfied with this new wide-angle view, she searches her MP3 player for a fitting soundtrack to the clamorous urban scene, ultimately deciding on a song entitled Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis, written and performed by the American jazz singer Tom Waits. In the following seven pages of the narrative, the author describes the city through her protagonist's subjectivity while intermittent English sentences (the song lyrics) supplement this *flâneurial* report of the city.[163] In this sense, the *flâneuse* creates a personal soundscape of the city by temporarily muting the noise of the urban mayhem and adding her favorite phonic element to the setting. The song's lyrics are an interesting choice, as they are written from the point of view of a prostitute who is drafting a letter to a man named Charlie, informing him that she is pregnant and leads a decent life. She boasts about her forthcoming wedding, adding that she has overcome alcohol addiction. By the end of the song, however, she reveals that she has fabricated the entire story and is currently imprisoned. The protagonist empathizes with the predicaments of the lyric's narrator and only criticizes her for revealing the truth at the end: "this part of the song just doesn't do it for me. Poor Charley, why do I have to wake him from his sweet dream to slap him with the truth?"[164]

Throughout the entirety of the scenes' narration, the protagonist is thoroughly placid, positioning herself at the top of the square while listening to Tom Waits' song and recounting the urban upheaval unfolding in front of her. Her

[163] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 40–47.
[164] Mohebbʿali, *In Case of Emergency*, 28.

equanimity is illustrated through her extensive reports of the scene and her occasional humorous remarks about the events: she comments on the odd behavior of other inhabitants and speculates about their life stories.

Furthermore, taking shelter in a higher position is in accordance with the *flâneur*e's journey. Deborah Parsons in her seminal book Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity, argues that Walter Benjamin's description of the figure of the flâneur changed over the thirteen years he devoted to writing about Paris and experiencing modern urban life. At first, the figure of the flâneur, mainly influenced by the urban wanderers in Baudelaire's poetry, was considered a city dweller who wandered around the streets and was fascinated by the crowd. Benjamin's later work transforms this figure or the "man of the crowd" into the "man at the window": a middle-class onlooker who no longer feels at ease in the urban populace. He feels threatened by various stimulations of the modern city; hence, he prefers to retreat to a position of "scopic authority"; he becomes a detached, immobile, and observant figure. In doing so, he tries to regain individual control of the city that is frighteningly in turmoil.[165] The dilemma of being intimidated by and yet keen on observing the urban environment is aptly caught in Shadi's change of spatial position to a higher place. Although the protagonist is inclined to witness the city's disarray, she requires a degree of detachment to report it.

In addition to the extended observation of the city from the top of the fountain square, there is another descriptive passage in which the narrator takes shelter by sitting on a car roof, reporting her observations. In this scene, a bully, whom the protagonist randomly names Aqa Gholam, is holding a dagger (*qama*), violently harassing and beating others. Shadi's retreat to a higher position, in this example, is at once for having a controlling view and for keeping herself out of harm's way. In the beginning, the protagonist tells Crassus, Ashkan's dog that accompanies her at this point of the narrative, that they should sit on the roof of the car to better observe a particularly fierce quarrel: "Crassus...there's a fight, let's go look at it."[166] She continues reporting on the scene until the very end, as the fight becomes all the more intense: eventually, other inhabitants defeat the bully, and this time, they begin to beat the former oppressor brutally.

In *Negaran nabash*, the act of observing from a higher position also has metaphorical implications, which the author delicately deploys throughout the novel. For instance, the protagonist's yearning for a better view from a higher physical position is coupled with her need to reach a drug-induced mental euphoria. In this respect, the narrator reveals that a couple of weeks prior, she climbed a tree under the influence of drugs.[167] In another passage, early in the novel, the narrative renders the reader an elevated perspective, through which they obtain a glimpse of the protagonist's physical surroundings as she is lying on her bed:

[165] Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis,* 34.
[166] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 114.
[167] Ibid., 17.

تصویرم از بالا جان می دهد برای یک های‌انگل: صورت فرورفته در بالش، ملافه‌ی چروک پیچیده دور شلوار جین و تی شرت خیس عرق.

My picture from the above is perfect for a high-angle shot: face sunk into the pillow, wrinkled sheets wrapped around jeans, and a sweat-soaked T-shirt.[168]

Presenting a wider narrativized frame of Shadi's sordid surroundings is paralleled with her desire to ascend various objects throughout the novel to gain a better view of the city. High-angel shots in cinematic narratives are often used to convey "a less powerful or compromised position" of the subject matter. Hence, the protagonist's reference to this kind of cinematic viewpoint exposes an unguarded vulnerability of her character to the reader.[169]

Although Shadi never explicitly expresses it, her social alienation is evidenced by the way she is treated by her family, friends, and other city inhabitants. Even when she visits her childhood friend, Sara, she mainly contemplates her affection towards the friend rather than conversing with her. The only occasion in which she feels relaxed and confident enough to talk about her emotion is when she addresses Crassus. The protagonist's tender feeling towards the dog is highlighted in a recounted memory: feeling miserable once after using an excessive amount of drug, Crassus sat beside the protagonist and howled in agony and solidarity until Shadi felt better.[170] Quite significantly, the affectionate relationship between the narrator, as a human, and her non-human company, the dog, gives her *flâneurial* reports a more intimate quality, as she occasionally tells the dog what she observes in the city. In fact, the only instance in which the *flâneuse* expresses her urban reports verbally is when she communicates with the dog: "I pull his head in close and stroke his stinky black fur [...] 'Look, Crassus. It's fucking amazing, straight out of Easy Street.' Crassus whimpers and nuzzles into me."[171] In this sense, the dog becomes a confidant, an ally with whom the *flâneuse* feels at ease in her exploration of the city. Even when the narrator spots Parvin, Elham's mother, in the crowd chanting revolutionary slogans, she negotiates with the dog if she should go into the crowd and help her. She ultimately decides that "she does not dare to come down" from the vehicle.[172] This is also one of her very last reports from the city; as she shares her final thoughts with Crassus, takes her last dose of opium, and gradually falls into a drug-induced stupor: "Why didn't you stay home with Ashkan? [...] A helicopter whirs overhead. I suck. I swallow. 'Maybe I'm good ... Maybe the big one will hit right now, and bingo, game over.

[168] Ibid., 7.

[169] For a detailed analysis of the implication of a high camera angle (and other shot types), see: Christopher J. Bowen, *Grammar of the Shot*, Fourth edition (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 59.

[170] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 65.

[171] Mohebbʿali, *In Case of Emergency*, 77

[172] Ibid., 116

The earth will crack open. Or this brick wall right here will collapse and crush us.' [...]"[173]

The social isolation of the protagonist of *Negaran nabash*, as discussed above, is mediated on several occasions throughout the narrative. She is ostracized from nearly every social group that she encounters: her family criticizes her, female inhabitants refuse to accept her as one of their own (as illustrated in the food queue), male inhabitants ridicule or harass her, and her friends do not show particular interest in her well-being. Even her rebellious younger brother does not perceive her as an equal companion in his quest to reclaim the city.

All this is precisely why Shadi is an impeccable example of the *flâneuse*. She is detached yet still tethered to the urban reality. She is not an absolute outcast but marginalized enough to understand the anguish of exclusion, as she is used to social rejection due to her drug abuse. Her sense of isolation prompts her *flâneurial* experience of the city, as she has no other occupation to attend to and no significantly beloved family or friend to depend on. During this hectic day, she has no business but to sense the city. Although Shadi's ambivalent feelings towards Tehran are reflected several times, her passion for the city is undeniable. Regardless of her disapproval of the unregulated architecture of the city or critique of inconsiderate citizens, she cannot resist showing affection for Tehran. She profoundly empathizes with the city and its past. In one instance, the protagonist claims that she is the only person who can truly feel the city amidst the clamor:

> روی زمین ولو می‌شوم و گوشم را روی زمین می‌گذارم[...]چرا ساکت نمی‌شوید کثافت‌ها؟ فقط یک دقیقه ساکت باشید!...گوش کنید!...به این لرزه‌ها گوش کنید![...]اگر یک ذره جیغ نزنید می‌شنوید[...]گوش کنید! آسفالت کف خیابان هم دارد حرف می‌زند. من صدای ترک خوردنش را می‌شنوم. قروچ و قروچش درآمده. انگار دارد قلنجش را می‌شکند و خستگی در می‌کند. خسته شده...خسته شده...خسته شده...گوش کنید کثافت‌ها.
>
> I sit and put my ear on the ground [...] Why don't you scums keep quiet? Just be quiet for a minute! ... Listen! ... Listen to these tremors! [...] If you do not scream just for a bit, you will hear [...] Listen! The asphalt of the street is also talking. I hear it cracking. It seems that it is cracking its knuckles to relieve its tiredness. It is tired ... It is tired ... It is tired ... Listen, scums.[174]

As other inhabitants are preoccupied with either fleeing from the city or, in the case of young residents, claiming their already deferred right to the city (the details of which will be discussed in length in chapter four), the *flâneuse* establishes a dialectical bond with the fabric of the urban space. The narrator states that the earthquake is a catharsis for the city to express the ill-treatment it has received over the elapsed decades. This intimate moment is in alignment with

[173] Ibid., 80.

[174] Mohebb'ali, *Negaran nabash*, 75.

what Howard Eiland, the editor, and translator of Walter Benjamin's works, formulates as a "dreamlike" understanding of urban history by the *flâneur*, through which the figure obtains a "felt knowledge" of the city.[175] Likewise, the protagonist of *Negaran nabash* is mindful that the unusual state of the city has provided her the opportunity to perceive the urban conditions of Tehran in a different, if not more profound, manner. In one instance, when Shadi descends from her dominating observant spot, as she needs to help her friend who is in danger, she declares: "I take my last look at the most beautiful street of Tehran. I may never be able to see you this beautiful again."[176]

Given her previous reports of the street that mainly consisted of turbulent urban scenes, what the protagonist refers to as beautiful, is the unleashed urban vivacity of Tehran on this particular day. The *flâneuse* of such a city, indeed, knows that it is the rarest of events to observe Tehran like this, and once the order is restored, everything will return to as it was: exhaustively conventional yet indiscernibly prone to violent rampage.

In the next section, I offer a brief plot summary of Sara Salar's novel, and subsequently, I explore how the flânerie observations of the protagonist construct an amalgamation of self-city in which the life history of the protagonist merges into, and is informed by, the collective history of Tehran. A significant theme in Salar's story is, however, the issue of identity, which I will extensively discuss in the fifth chapter. In the following section, I mainly focus on aspects of the protagonist's contemplation that filter through the city's façade and create an essentially palimpsestic urban setting.

The Synthesis of Urban Memory and Individual Experience in *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*

Plot Summary

The novel centers around the life of an unnamed woman in her mid-30s who constantly ruminates over her past. Although the narrative-time includes less than 24 hours of the protagonist's activities, the story-time spans her entire life, particularly her childhood memories.

The nameless protagonist is originally from Zahedan, located in the country's southeast, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan.[177] The narrator formerly lived in Zahedan with her parents and younger twin brothers. A major part of the narrative dwells on the protagonist's relationship with her parents, especially her

[175] Howard Eiland, "Superimposition in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary, no. 138 (2007), 122.

[176] Mohebb'ali, *Negaran nabash*, 47.

[177] Sara Salar is also originally from Zahedan. In an interview, she elaborates on how the experience of living in a small town during her childhood has inspired parts of her narrative in *Ehtemalan*. See: Sara Salar, *Daghdaghe-haye man ensani hastand*, interview by Elaheh Khosravi Yeganeh, April 2014.

ambivalent feelings towards her mother, whose drug addiction has left its marks on the protagonist's childhood. The narrator grew up in a religious family, and her free-spirited personality was not in accordance with customary norms. As a result, throughout her childhood, she was constantly criticized for her unconventional behavior. However, getting to know Gandom, a childhood friend, became a turning point for the protagonist, as her new friend prompted her to be more audacious and embrace life more liberated manner. At 18, the protagonist was admitted into a university program and moved to the capital city. She maintained her relationship with Gandom and had a few romantic interests, for example, a classmate named Farid Dehdar. While in Tehran, the narrator received the news of the unexpected death of her twin brothers; this incessantly distressed her. Not being able to cope with the pain of this loss, she avoided visiting Zahedan thereafter. Consequently, she secured a living in Tehran by marrying a wealthy businessman named Keyvan.

All this information is interspersed in the narrative through the narrator's contemplations over her past life. In the narrative-time, the protagonist wakes up with the constant sound of a ringing phone. In the following paragraphs, frequent clues are dropped to highlight her unstable mental state: she is confused about her whereabouts, unsure of what time it is, and she cannot remember where her son, Samyar, is. Wandering around the house to look for her son, she is finally relieved to remember that she had sent Samyar to kindergarten in the morning. She then begins the day by running errands in the city and collecting her son from kindergarten. She also must deal with Mansour, a friend and business collaborator of her husband, whose unwelcome sexual and romantic advances irritate her.

The narrator constantly thinks about Gandom, as the two old friends have not had any contact for several years. By the novel's end, the narrator is determined to find answers regarding her past self; hence, she visits her old lover, Farid Dehdar. The novel's final paragraph leaves the reader with the protagonist's last contemplation about Gandom, indicating that her journey has led her to come to terms with her past and establish a new relationship with repressed parts of her personality.

Main Features

The 143-page novel of Sara Salar is divided into eight chapters. The nonlinear narrative structure of the novel is predominately set in the present day but constantly shifts back to childhood memories or recent events, such as the protagonist's conversations during therapy sessions. Through these scattered passages, the narrator's background is gradually revealed. By the novel's end, the reader gathers an abundance of information about the protagonist's past: the questions concerning where she is from, who her parents were, or how she met her husband are all answered. The reader even gets glimpses of the narrator's

burnout regarding her maternal duties. Nevertheless, the actual name of the protagonist is not revealed. Through a nameless protagonist, Sara Salar's novel is an exploration of different aspects of identity: how it is rooted in life experiences, shaped by spatial surroundings, and finally, and probably most notably in the case of this novel, what happens if an individual loses an integrated sense of self. Through numerous memories recounted in the novel, the reader gradually suspects Gandom may not be an external character but rather the protagonist herself: the more active, vigorous, and courageous part of the narrator's personality she has tried to suppress throughout her life. The narrated childhood memories illuminate how the small community of her hometown rarely accepted Gandom/protagonist. There are several clues in the narrative concerning the protagonist's identity struggles and her connection to Gandom as part of her past selfhood, which will be discussed in detail in the fifth chapter.[178]

Another important factor in discussing the protagonist's narrative trajectory is related to her alcohol consumption; this is slyly thematized in the novel. As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this book, the systematic censorship imposed on Iranian cultural products profoundly affects how writers approach sensitive issues. Since the consumption of alcoholic beverages is prohibited in Iran, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's print policy disqualifies any story that directly promotes or even mentions the act of drinking alcohol. Iranian writers, however, often find ways to circumvent censorship. For example, Sara Salar deployed a narrative technique to reflect on the role of alcohol in the character's life: the protagonist of *Ehtemalan* carries a water bottle throughout the narrative, becomes nervous when the bottle is empty, and constantly thinks about returning home to refill the bottle. Nevertheless, her longing for the water bottles delicately indicates that the liquid inside them might be more than just plain water:

> می‌خواهم برسم خانه. شاید دلم برای بطری‌های آبم تنگ است [...]می‌دانم از حالا که شروع می شود و تا نصفه‌شب تمام نمی شود، که می دانم من دیگر تحملش را ندارم، تحمل آن آدمی را که تلوتلو خوران برای خودش می‌رقصد.
>
> I want to get home. Maybe I miss my water bottles]...[I know when it starts; it doesn't end until midnight, and I know I can no longer tolerate it, the person who staggers, the person who dances all alone.[179]

In another instance, the protagonist describes her deteriorating physical state, which includes symptoms such as severe headache, vomiting, and vertigo; all these are indicators of common aftereffects of excessive alcohol consumption.

[178] For a more detailed discussion about the identity conflict of the protagonist and the textual hints evidencing that Gandom is an imaginary character created by the narrator, see chapter five: pp 166–68.

[179] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 111.

Accordingly, the protagonist constantly struggles with her yearning for the water bottles: "I open the fridge, a small bottle of water… I gulp half of it at once […] I empty the other half in the sink."[180]
Had the usage of alcoholic beverages been discernibly described in the novel, these parts would have unquestionably been redacted by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, or the book might not have obtained permission to be published. Therefore, by adopting this strategy and not vividly mentioning the content of the bottles, Salar cleverly avoids possible censorship of her work. I will readdress this point later in the chapter and elaborate on how the drinking habit of the protagonist affects her as a *flâneuse*.

Tellingly, an important feature of the narrative language of the novel is unfinished sentences, which foreground the protagonist's state of intoxication, and her lack of concentration. The novel is fraught with incomplete sentences that the narrator never obliges herself to finish or provide more information about. This narrative feature not only conveys the protagonist's disoriented mental state but also gives the reader an impression of the briskness of urban life. For instance, at one point, the restless protagonist, stuck in a heavy traffic jam, narrates what she hears on the radio. The commentator discusses: "the natural differences between men and women," arguing that a woman's debauchery would lead to damaging her husband's reputation, "but if a man… ."[181] The protagonist's report is abruptly interrupted, and she does not finish the sentence. This may indicate the protagonist's anxiety; due to the city's turmoil, she is unable to concentrate on listening to the rest of the program. It may also suggest the protagonist's unwillingness to focus on the innately misogynistic message communicated by the radio commentator.

If Mahsa Mohebbʿali's depiction of Tehran in *Negaran nabash* entailed an earthquake-stricken city prevailed by anarchic citizens who were temporarily liberated from excessive urban control, *Ehtemalan* narrates the events occurring in the phase prior to the earthquake. In the narrativized Tehran by Salar, the urbanite is agitated; they are constantly overwhelmed by a ubiquitous uncertainty forced upon them by the urban fabric of Tehran. As a result, they release their anxiety by falling into violent quarrels with each other. Amidst these, the story's protagonist tries to piece the fragmented parts of her past back together and make sense of her life.

The Journey of an Introspective auto-*flâneuse* in Tehran's Highways

The main character of *Ehtemalan* is older and relatively more independent compared to the protagonist of *Negaran nabash*, yet she interacts with the city cautiously and prudently. Moreover, the nameless protagonist is continuously aware

[180] Ibid., 120
[181] Ibid., 44.

of her surroundings, for she is anxious about other inhabitants' perceptions of her behavior in the urban space.

The narrative does not provide much information regarding the exact itinerary of the protagonist; only a few specific locations, such as Darband district, or Kamraniyeh Street, are explicitly mentioned in the text. In this sense, for much of the novel, the author does not specify at which streets or through which highways her character is walking or driving.

The narrator initiates her urban quest, intriguingly, by a similar struggle as the protagonist of *Negaran nabash*: namely, the omnipresent gaze of other citizens and the protagonists' yearning not to be an object. For instance, as the protagonist eats lunch with her son at a restaurant, she describes a woman sitting at the next table giving her the side-eye.[182] Although the glare makes the narrator uncomfortable, she diffidently chooses to remain silent. In another instance, later in the novel, the protagonist refers to the problem of not being able to exert her agency through the gaze:

> یعنی واقعا هنوز هم نمی‌توانم به آدم‌های دور و برم راحت نگاه کنم؟...شاید بتوانم...مثلا شاید بتوانم به این آقای تقریبا پنجاه‌ساله‌ی خوش‌تیپی که با قدم‌های بلند و مطمئن از آن بالا پایین می‌آید هرچقدر دلم می‌خواد نگاه کنم، بدون اینکه نگران باشم درباره‌ام چی فکر می‌کند....عینکم را برمی‌دارم و نگاهش می‌کنم...به هم نزدیک می‌شویم...نگاهش می‌کنم...نزدیک‌تر...سرم را می‌اندازم پایین و دیگر نگاهش نمی‌کنم...پاهاش را می‌بینم که از کنارم رد می‌شوند...عینکم را می‌زنم و به خودم می‌گویم یکی به نفع گندم.
>
> I mean, I really still can't comfortably look at people around me? Maybe I can...let's say, maybe I can look, as much as I want, at this handsome, almost fifty-year-old gentleman who comes down with long, confident steps, and I wouldn't be worried about what he thinks of me... I take off my glasses and look at him...we get closer...I look at him...closer...I lower my head, and I don't look at him anymore...I see his feet that pass by me...I put on my glasses and tell myself one in favor of Gandom.[183]

The narrator is determined to assert her gaze, which is not bereft of eroticized notions, on the attractive man. Nevertheless, she draws back at the last minute and cannot succeed in dealing with her enduring problem. The protagonist averting her gaze and setting her eyes on the ground calls to mind the traditional view regarding women's presence in public space, according to which modest women should lower their gaze and avoid confrontation. This issue is also in alignment with the protagonist's upbringing, as in the hometown of Zahedan, she was constantly exposed to the traditional gender hierarchies. The protagonist was particularly subjugated to the expected norms regarding the conventional behavior of the female body in public space, the effects of which are still noticeable in her adult life.

[182] Ibid., 33.
[183] Ibid., 29.

Central to the dual account of the body/space relations in *Ehtemalan*, however, is the urban fabric of Tehran. Although the capital city provides the protagonist with an opportunity to experience public space with more autonomy, it also harbors new challenges. For this reason, the narrator of *Ehtemalan* is more inclined to experience the city from within her car and while driving through numerous highways. Being in the car grants the narrator a sense of privacy, safety, and control. Consequently, she is not preoccupied with her body's performance in the public space, as the vehicle provides her with a mobile, private sphere through which she can observe the teeming streets of Tehran.

The relationship between cars and the act of flânerie is also quite interesting, as the prevalence of vehicles on the streets, at first, was conceived as a threat to the *flâneur*. For example, Keith Tester, the editor of the seminal book, The *Flâneur*, warns in the introduction that "if the *flâneur* does not pay attention when he crosses roads, he too will become a victim of a lorry."[184] Nonetheless, like other aspects of the cultural concept of the *flâneur*, what was once perceived as unimaginable, or threatening, is ultimately integrated into re-conceptualizing the figure based on the ever-changing urban reality. Because of this, the urban experience of the driver *flâneur*, often categorized as auto-*flâneur*, has been studied in comparison to that of the pedestrian *flâneur*. For instance, Kathleen Hulser addresses the visual practices of the auto-*flâneur*, especially concerning roadside advertising. In this type of flânerie, as Hulser argues, a new mode of observation occurs: "viewing the passing scene from behind a wheel integrated roadside elements into a fleeting but satisfying glance that had more to do with submerging oneself in an experience than surveying a lovely prospect."[185] Husler further examines the intrinsically capitalistic nature of the auto-flânerie, as drivers are enclosed in a commercialized urban space, in which consumption is excessively encouraged through outdoor advertising. She also suggests that this type of spectatorship "fed both curiosity and fostered detachment," as urban wanderers are presented with a wide range of urban stimulations without having to be in their vicinity.[186]

The necessity of the interspace between the observer and urban objects is precisely why the protagonist of *Ehtemalan* spends most of her urban venture in the car. She yearns to observe the city, yet she needs to disassociate herself from outside space. Her desire to observe Tehran is reflected in several passages in which the protagonist elaborately describes urban scenes. Interestingly, like the auto-*flâneur* of American suburbs articulated by Husler, the protagonist of *Ehtemalan* is also immersed in roadside advertising, and a significant part of her flânerie is allocated to inspecting commercial displays.

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[184] Keith Tester, "Introduction," in *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

[185] Kathleen Hulser, "Auto-Flâneurs and Roadside Ads in the 1950s," in *Suburban Discipline*, ed. Peter Lang and Tam Miller, StoreFront Books 2 (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 10.

[186] Ibid., 13.

Nevertheless, the narrator of *Ehtemalan*, in contrast to the passive auto-*flâneur* of Husley's essay, reports on billboards with a sardonic tone; and thus, communicates her pessimistic attitude regarding the advertising industry. For instance, while driving and ruminating over her fear of isolation as a teenager, the narrator abruptly shifts from her contemplative thoughts to describe a billboard on the highway: "A large billboard entirely colored in sky blue, and in the middle, it's written: no one is alone, with *Hamrah-e-avval*."[187] The billboard promotes *Hamrah-e-avval* (the literal translation of "the first companion"), which is the largest telecommunication company in Iran. The advertisement's beguiling yet superficial slogan juxtaposes the protagonist's psychological disposition, especially considering the life-long social anxiety she referred to in the preceding passage.

On another occasion, the narrator gets a glimpse of the disfigured body of a young cyclist hit by a car. Witnessing this disturbing scene unsettles the protagonist, evoking memories of her vulnerable childhood self, unable to defend herself from the toxic behavior of her addicted mother. Like the previous contemplation, this one is interrupted by the description of a billboard whose upper section depicts impoverished children playing on the dirt ground. On the lower part are pictures of household appliances and a slogan that reads: "let's make a better world for children, Samsung supporting UNICEF."[188]

In this respect, the *flâneuse* actively reads the city while driving and puts her life's events in dialogue with the information she gathers from her surroundings. In accordance with the transient aspect of the auto-flânerie, however, the observer merely gets a fleeting glance of urban objects; the narrator does not linger on describing the billboard in detail or overtly elaborates on her antipathy towards the commercialized content. The description of the billboard is, nevertheless, embedded in the narrative in direct relation to the protagonist's memories. Therefore, in this case, the previously narrated events about the main character's strict upbringing and the tragic fate of the cyclist propound the quixotic notion of the emotionally manipulative advertisement.

The imagery of childhood maltreatment is linked to and sets the narrative tone for another reflective passage a few pages later, as the narrator ponders over her twin brothers' death. Rather than revealing the actual cause of death, she expresses her inconsolable grief by taking account of all the fatal possibilities that might have triggered her brothers' demise; the likelihood extending from the siblings' drowning in the sea to their deaths in a house fire. At one point, she even speculates: "maybe my brothers hanged themselves, like the neighbor's boy who hanged himself when I was a high school student."[189] Therein lies another subtle reference to the narrator's stance against the marketing campaign of Samsung and its incentive to construct a safe world for children, as her memories, and the

[187] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 43.
[188] Ibid., 58.
[189] Ibid., 59.

events of the lives of people whom she has met or known, are fraught with countervailing occurrences.

In this sense, there is ongoing silent communication between the *flâneuse* and the city through these billboards, as she incorporates city elements into her contemplations about the past. In addition to the roadside advertising, for instance, the urban façade constantly reminds the narrator of its fluctuating social environment. Salar's narrative is dense with recurrent descriptions of the cityscape that are emblematic of underlying sociopolitical tensions. For instance, on one occasion, as the narrator walks down a street, she spots large banners promoting a conference about HIV: "the biggest HIV conference, HIV is close to you...on another one, it is written: earthquake is normal, not being prepared is abnormal."[190]

On a literal and symbolic level, the banners communicate that the city can quiver at any given moment or be the incubator of contaminations and diseases. On the other hand, both messages foreground the thematic center of the novel: the spatial dimension of self-conception and how this can be affected when one lives in an unpredictable urban environment like Tehran.

The much-emphasized volatile nature of the city is also captured in several scattered passages about the social distress of the urban populace, triggered by economic decline and unsettled political circumstances. At one point, as the protagonist passes by a newsstand, she casts a cursory glance at the newspaper headlines: "the economic problem is the conspiracy of the enemy."[191] The narrator's intermittent reports on the radio programs she listens to while driving, concomitantly, entail references to the socio-urban affairs, as the newscast primarily covers incidents about the staggering number of drug addicts in the city, political turmoil, or the collapsing buildings of Tehran.[192] Through all these accounts, the city is delineated as a setting whose volatile urban dynamic is an ever-present source of agitation for its inhabitants, as it overloads the observer with messages, creating a cacophony that can sometimes be unbearable to tolerate. This situation also denotes the degree to which the protagonist/*flâneuse* is perturbed about public space, and, as a result, she is ceaselessly alert when in the city.

This issue is highlighted later in the novel and in connection to the news report of a collapsed building when the narrator describes high-rise buildings in the city's northern part: "they seem to be suspended between earth and sky. It is as if with a small jiggle, they can easily disintegrate and fall down."[193] This imagery, albeit metaphorical, underlines the protagonist's deep sense of distrust in relation to Tehran: even the urban fabric, in the protagonist's subjectivity, is incompetent and unreliable.

Another essential factor about the *flânuerial* observation of the narrator is related to the protagonist's alcohol consumption, as she constantly refers to her

[190] Ibid., 61.
[191] Ibid., 63.
[192] Ibid., 20, 47, 105, 106.
[193] Ibid., 16.

pressing need to drink from the bottles she carries. Although she maintains a certain level of lucidity and, for example, never loses consciousness, her altered state of mind affects the way she observes the city. Given that in the episodes in which the narrator recounts her conversation with her therapist, she appears to be a shy and reserved person, as she mainly answers the question with short sentences, yet her state of drunkenness renders an impulse to be more confident in narration, remembering, and contemplating. Moreover, this state of mind has also afforded her a sense of extra sensitivity to mundane urban objects—and that is why she ceaselessly offers a description of the billboards or urban displays. In other words, the way that the *flâneuse* of Salar's story can simultaneously record glimpses of the city, and connect them to her individual life, putting herself in a fragmentary conversation with the city, is related to her alcohol-induced, sudden desire to experience the city. In this respect, the episodic structure of the narrative presents the narrator's feverish urge to explore memories of herself and the city. In this capacity, the *Tehrani*an *flâneuse* in *Ehtemalan* accepts different signs through which the city asserts its presence in her observations and integrates them into her self-discovery journey.

However, the protagonist of *Ehtemelan* does not feel entirely safe in Tehran, even when her disrupted track of thoughts indicates her state of intoxication. She constantly refers to the high number of traffic collisions in the city, for instance, and she shares her ultimate fear of losing her life on one of Tehran's highways. A few pages after the young cyclist's episode, the protagonist experiences a car accident herself. Although the crash does not inflict substantial physical damage, the argument between the drivers hurriedly leads to an exchange of aggressive remarks and, ultimately, a street fight. The feud is resolved in the end when the narrator's family friend, Mansur, comes to the scene and promises to reimburse the involved parties. Nevertheless, the ferocious quarrel between the agitated citizens and its brusqueness highlights the unpredictability of Tehran and has a disconcerting effect on the protagonist.

The character's firmly established wariness of the city is partly due to her multifaceted body history since the protagonist, on numerous occasions, recounts childhood memories in which her family reproached her for not conforming to the social and moral codes concerning how a female body should inhabit public space. As an adult, she still is affected by these experiences and often does not feel at ease in the city's public space.[194] Besides the protagonist's individual past, her attitude towards Tehran is also rooted in the way the city, in and of itself, is constructed, transformed, and governed. If, in her hometown, the protagonist's behavior in public space was principally influenced by social norms, her experience in Tehran is affected by other forces, in particular, the urban governance of the capital city.

[194] I have thoroughly discussed the protagonist's conflicted body history in the fifth chapter, see: pp 131–136.

An important example of being subjugated to such urban control is narrated in the passage when the protagonist recounts the events of a hiking trip in the northern mountains of Tehran. Farid Dehdar, a male friend and a possible romantic interest, accompanies her on this day trip. The events of the day take a surprising turn when the protagonist and Farid are interrogated and eventually arrested by the morality police of Tehran. The violent behavior of the police staff agitates the protagonist to the extent that she feels nauseous, beseeching them to release her. This event is focalized through the perspective of the adult narrator, as she distances herself from this memory and instead blames Gandom's audacity for causing the trouble. Due to her conservative upbringing, which encouraged female modesty, the character cannot tolerate finding herself in such a situation: "I was dying of fear [...] I said I swear to God I didn't do anything...I'm nobody...It's all Gandom's fault...This bitch, Gandom."[195] In the next paragraph, the protagonist reveals that she was taken to prison that night and was only released by signing an official letter of commitment (*taʿahhod-nameh*), pledging that she would not act in the same manner again.

In the wake of this event, the narrator realizes that to live in Tehran, she needs to acquaint herself with a new set of rules and urban policies, the consequence of which is also reflected in the character's predilection as an adult for maintaining her urban life mainly from within the safe space of her car.

Nevertheless, as the built environments of cities are constantly subject to change, so are the spatial politics and social orders. The narrator, as a *flâneuse*, is not oblivious to these forms of alterations. She compares the current situation in Tehran to the time when she was merely a newcomer to the city. One of the most salient changes in the city is related to urban control, which has become less strict:

> صدای خنده‌ی اکیپی که از کنارم رد می‌شوند، مثل سوزن‌های ریز و درشت می‌پاشد توی هوا...به خودم می‌گویم به جهنم که دیگر دخترها و پسرها می‌توانند راحت با هم راه بروند، راحت با هم گپ بزنند، راحت دست همدیگر را بگیرند، راحت توی رستوران‌ها و کافه تریاها ناهار و چایی و نسکافه و قهوه و کافه گلاسه و سان‌شاین و ...
>
> The sound of laughter of a group nearby spreads into the air like tiny needles...I tell myself that I don't give a damn that these girls and boys can walk together easily, talk together easily, hold hands easily, eat in the restaurants and cafeterias easily, have lunch, tea, Nescafe, coffee, ice coffee, and sunshine smoothie, and...[196]

Although pleased with witnessing the urban transformations, the protagonist cannot hide a sense of remorse and envy (that stings her as subtly as the touch of "tiny needles"). She did not experience Tehran in the same way as the new

[195] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 112.
[196] Ibid., 26.

generation. This is key in understanding not only the struggles of the main character in regard to the specific spatial governing rules of Tehran but also in analyzing other examples of textually crafted versions of Tehran.

Conceptualizing space and place in terms of social relations, feminist geographer Doreen Massey suggests that "the spatial is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification."[197] In other words, space is shaped by social interactions, and these interactions are not motionless exchanges; they are rather processes occurring in particular places. She then concludes that "places are processes, too."[198] This issue is affirmed by Lawrence Buell, an ecocriticism scholar, who highlights the fact that individuals are not able to prevent spatial changes as they are one of the reasons for these alterations: "places have histories; place is not just a noun but also a verb, a verb of action; and this action is always happening around us, because of us, despite us."[199]

This ephemeral nature of spatial norms is what Salar refers to in the above passage through her main character's observations. Places are always in alteration, and individuals have no choice but to accept the constant becomingness of their surroundings. The Tehran experienced by the protagonist in her early 20s is not the same city she currently lives in. Every space the protagonist has inhabited throughout her life has transformed over time. Thus, the protagonist's self-discovery journey is not only a quest for an integrated self but also an attempt to comprehend the spatial becomingness occurring around her.

Salar's narrative, based on the quintessentially shifting nature of urban space, ties in the individual recollections of the protagonist with the collective memory of the city. By collective memory, I refer to a historical reading of the city by the *flâneuse*, as she documents the events of the past that are witnessed, mediated, and socially constructed by the inhabitants of Tehran for years and generations.[200]

In this sense, when the protagonist walks through the ebbs and flows of the streets, reviewing her memories, the fragmented pieces of the character's life become the constituent parts of the urban history of Tehran. The interconnectedness of individual and collective memory is, for instance, best captured in a passage in which the protagonist visits her old dormitory in Tehran. Her son, Samyar, accompanies her on this expedition. As his mother is occupied with the retrospective remembrance of past events, he entertains himself by clumsily dancing and running, eventually losing his balance. The protagonist, pretending she has not noticed the fall to encourage Samyar to stand up on his own, wonders:

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[197] Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 3.

[198] Ibid., 155.

[199] Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 67.

[200] French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs first theorized the concept of Collective Memory. For an extensive discussion on Halbwachs' theorization and its relation to the public urban space, see: Michael Hebbert, "The Street as Locus of Collective Memory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 4 (August 2005): 581–96.

"after all, do boys dance too? After all, do boys also get scared? Finally, he gets up, shakes the dust off his pants, and keeps running…Isn't it the case that boys should become men as soon as possible, farting under the burden of life so that no one can hear them."[201]

This seemingly out-of-place reflection is instantly followed by a relatively extensive passage in which the narrator dwells on the circumstances of Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war. Although she did not live in the city at that time, the resurfaced ramifications of the war still mark the city:

> حالا روزی چند تا شهید تکه‌تکه‌ی جنگ هشت‌ساله‌ای ایران و عراق تشییع می‌شدند و به خاک سپرده می‌شدند و این‌قدر تشییع می شدند و به خاک سپرده می‌شدند و این‌قدر تشییع می‌شدند و به خاک سپرده می‌شدند که دیگر آدم یادش می‌رفت که این چیزهایی که این‌قدر تشییع می‌شوند و به خاک سپرده می‌شوند…
>
> Everyday funerals were held for the dismembered bodies of martyrs of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, and they were buried, and funerals were held so many times, and they were buried so many times, and funerals were held so many times, and they were buried so many times that one would no longer remember that the funerals that are held so many times and these things that are buried so many times and …[202]

At first blush, the narrator's reference to gender stereotypes about young males might appear unrelated to her previous recollection. It is, however, only in relation to the subsequent paragraph that this contemplation becomes a pertinent part of the narrator's *flâneurial* journey: Samyar's flamboyant bodily movements, in the above passage, evoke memories of war, and through this, the author refers to the regime's ideologically-driven notion of martyrdom. During the Iran-Iraq war, sacrificing one's life in the battleground was promoted as the noblest of pursuits for young boys; hence, the narrator, as an attentive *flâneuse* who does observe not only the present state of the city but also the past, compares her son's happy and care-free childhood to that of the ill-fated child soldiers.

To this effect, and in a syntactically-structured paragraph, the author depicts present-day Tehran as a city still enduring the consequences of the war. The exhumed bodies of unidentified soldiers recalibrate the map of the city, layering it with marks of its past crisis. In other words, the *flâneuse* passes through a map of her memories to walk into the collective history of Tehran.

Similarly, the narrative technique of repeated sentences provides hallucinatory imagery of the city as a burial place of innumerable corpses and, consequently, renders a palimpsestic view of Tehran. Emphasizing the repetitiveness of the act of interment, the narrator concludes this ultimately might result in people becoming oblivious to the catastrophe of the past. The *flâneuse*, however, is not deluded by the unremitting spatial transformation of the urban façade and attempts to discover and re-walk past trajectories of the city.

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[201] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 88–89.

[202] Ibid., 89.

In the next section, I expand on the *flâneurial* observations of the protagonists of these novels, and compare the two versions in terms of the urban knowledge they offer in their narratives and the urbanite they represent by their performance in the city.

Final Discussion

There are essential differences and certain similarities between the two literary examples of the *flâneuse* discussed in this chapter. Not delineating a textual metropolis of particularly appealing sites or welcoming streets, the chaos of the city in both novels is reconsidered through the individual efforts of the main characters to perceive the urban condition of Tehran. In doing so, central to the maze-like *flâneurial* journey of the two characters is a conscious yearning to chronicle the past trajectory of the city beneath the debacle of present-day Tehran.

As discussed above, although the protagonist of *Negaran nabash* maintains a seriocomic attitude in her detached observations of urban scenes, she intently seeks to report on the multivalent urban realities of Tehran. In her observations, she is obsessed with an across-the-board description to document everything that happens on the streets. If she refers to the figure of an intimidator who physically harasses other city inhabitants, she is attentive enough to narrate his fate and how the formerly oppressed crowd—once they defeat the bully— propagates the same sectarian violence.

In conflict-ridden Tehran of *Negaran nabash*, the *flâneuse* is characterized by her ambivalent feelings toward, and yet her acute curiosity about, her city. She develops a dialectical understanding of the city's past and present, as illustrated in her attempt to listen to the city by putting her ear close to the asphalt. The protagonist, through the exterior city, infiltrates the mythic origin of Tehran and can listen to the city's voice.

Mohebbʿali's Tehran, in this sense, is a locus of possibilities in all its forms and manifestations. The urbanite of her novel, given the mayhem induced by the aftershocks of the earthquake, defies the customary urban control. This Tehran, although hectic and at times frighteningly anarchic, is, nevertheless, an alternative for the current version of the city. In this possible Tehran, the marginalized inhabitants become visible on the streets, the vagabond is less fearful, the urban outsiders are included, the former communist finds her forgotten rebellious voice, and the protagonist/*flâneuse* (who knows the geography of her city very well) indulges in observing the familiar streets through this new alternative mode. In this quasi-surrealist Tehran, all the urban tribes attest to their presence and their individual–mostly unrealized–rights. This carnivalesque aspect of the textualized city, as it will be discussed in the next chapter, is not solely to imagine an earthquake-stricken city but to envision the part of the urbanite whose presence has been neglected in a predominantly authoritative urban environment.

In the case of the unnamed protagonist of *Ehtemalan*, even though her own struggles subsume her, she makes an effort to take account of the political, social, and cultural life of Tehran. Salar, in her narrative, offers a psychogeographic map of the city based on her protagonist's memories, fear, struggles, dreams, and desires. However, in this interplay of the city and the protagonist's inner life, the city is not merely a setting marked by personal memories. The urban landscape of Tehran ceaselessly asserts its presence in the novel, ushering the protagonist towards the city's course of history: billboards can function as relics of ruined childhood, both for the protagonist as well as other individuals, and the recently exhumed bodies of martyrs can be reminiscent of dreadful war years. The Tehran of *Ehtemalan*, therefore, is constructed as a palimpsest through which the *flâneuse* deciphers the layered past.

Moreover, the discourse of the gaze is also addressed in both novels. The *flâneuse*s of these narratives deal with the predicaments of being the object of the unwanted gaze. They also desire to direct their gaze at the urban mix, circumventing the obstacles preventing them from performing their duties as an urban wanderer. In *Negaran nabash*, the temporary hectic state of the city renders the protagonist an opportunity to challenge, and defy, the voyeuristic gaze of other inhabitants. From then on, she can even assert her gaze at the urban objects without being triggered by the unwanted attention she receives throughout her journey.

In the case of the protagonist of *Ehtemalan*, her struggle to overcome the difficulties of inserting her gaze is underpinned by her convoluted body history. She is incessantly anxious about her presence in the city and how the citizenry of Tehran perceives her. The *flâneuse* attempts to overcome this struggle by escaping the unwanted gaze and asserting her own, yet this does not prove efficient. As a result, the narrator maintains most of her urban adventure as an auto-*flâneuse*; thereby, she is more at ease, casting her reflective gaze.

Similarly, for both figures of the *flâneuse*, some detachment from the urban scene is necessary. Shadi, as a destined high-level observer, seeks refuge in elevated positions. In doing so, she is not entirely disconnected from the city, and her observations are not burdened with a sense of insecurity she would feel while physically amongst the bustling crowd. The protagonist of *Ehtemalan*, likewise, partly distances herself from the urban throng by majorly retreating to her car, as the windshield mediates her observation and shields her from possible dangers.

Another similarity between the two figures is related to the psychoactive substances they ingest throughout the narrative. While Mohebbʿali explicitly introduces her protagonist as a drug addict who frequently takes narcotic drugs, Salar's character's alcohol abuse, as elaborated previously, is subtly referred to in the novel. Interestingly, the closing lines in both novels capture the protagonists in a state of substance-induced ecstasy. In *Negaran nabash*, the dismal tone of the narration conveys a sense of pessimism through the final rapture of the protagonist, as she takes shelter beneath the city, beside the wastewater pipe system. The level-down also bears metaphorical implications, presaging the fate of Shadi, and those alike, who retreat to the invisible, hidden margins of the city within which

they hitherto conceal themselves. The protagonist of *Ehtemalan*, on the other hand, finds her euphoria in an inebriated state, emboldening her to meet her old lover; and thus, putting an end to her self-discovery journey.

That Mohebbʿali's narrator is characterized as a marginal figure does not make her less of a *flâneuse* (or more of one, for that matter) compared to the more conventional protagonist of Salar's novel. They have access to different parts of the city and are in contact with distinctive urbanites. Their flânerie is a quest to understand not only their surroundings but also themselves. Their wanderings are the epitome of the ever-lasting desire of the figure of the *flâneur/flâneuse*; to document and preserve the city as it is, and as it was.

Deborah Parsons, in one of her concluding statements about the inherent characteristic of the *flâneuse*, and her essential differences compared to the *flâneur*, states: "[t]he perspective of the *flâneuse* is thus necessarily less leisured, as well as less assured, yet also more consciously adventurous."[203] As shown above, the experiences of these two literary Iranian *flâneuse*s, although influenced by the underlying socio-political context, had nothing short of an adventurous journey, revealing the marginal, inspecting the history: eventful excursions within self and without.

[203] Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 42.

Chapter IV: Contested City: The Dynamics of Social Exclusion & Urban Claim-making Practices

Tehran is a pregnant woman,
who is not aware of her dragon fetus.[204]

Cities are not coherent wholes; they are socially diverse, culturally heterogeneous, and in most cases, politically contested. Because of this, the issue of urban belonging has become an integral part of academic and public discourse about cities, raising questions such as who owns a city, who has the right to be visible in that city, and whose presence would be considered problematic. Urban spaces, accordingly, are fraught with distinctive forms of claims of belonging to the city, an issue discussed by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre.

In his seminal essay the Right to the City, Lefebvre insists on the necessity of urban inclusion, arguing that if a city were accessible to the entirety of its inhabitants, a democratically governed and pleasant urban society would be created. Lefebvre admits that his notion of the Right to the City is utopian in nature. Nevertheless, he outlines the characteristics of this idealistic urban condition, implying that by "the reversal of the current situation," the process of urbanization will be changed to create cities in which diversity is embraced, social justice is guaranteed, and all inhabitants can benefit from the city's prosperity.[205]

As stated above, belonging to the city has multifarious aspects and can be approached from two different angles. First, by discussing how different groups of inhabitants obtain access to the opportunities that an urban environment can afford. Secondly, by considering how different groups' oppositional attitudes give rise to social tension. Urban belonging can also be considered in terms of power relations, which examines the ways in which urban space is regulated and whose rights, in its Lefebvrian sense, are neglected in favor of the dominant group. In both cases, city inhabitants, especially those who are excluded and marginalized, seek to assert their position in the city through a series of claim-making practices in urban space. For example, instances of these include citizens declaring and demanding their rights from city officials through street protests. On the other hand, in the case of rising social tension, claim-making practices take the shape of violent disputes among various groups of inhabitants, which result in a divided city where each specific group aims to demonstrate its superiority over the others.

In his chapter, accordingly, the characteristics of the narrativized Tehran are discussed as they relate to the underlying social dynamics and political power

[204] Zahra ʿAbdi, *Natamami* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2016), 197.

[205] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 172; for a full discussion about the concept see the second chapter: pp 39–44.

arrangements. The focus, in particular, here is the specific kinds of claim-making strategies that are explored in the novels. The first section examines Mahsa Mohebbʿali's novel *Negaran nabash*, whose narrative, as discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter, constructs Tehran and portrays its citizens in the middle of the sheer chaos of an earthquake; the seismic hazard merely being a pretext for the author to envision Tehran unbound by constraints of the urban control.[206]

The next novel discussed is Zahra ʿAbdi's *Natamami* (Unfinished), which narrates the story of a young girl searching for her missing roommate in the turmoil of the capital city. The protagonist's journey, however, is not the only one narrated in the novel, as there are several other characters whose accounts of urban adventure are partially interwoven in the narrative thread insofar as they affect the events of the two main characters' lives. Since *Natamami* is analyzed for the first time in this chapter, a plot summary will be presented in addition to a section examining the novel's main narratological and thematic elements. Subsequently, the vital role of the main characters' provincial roots in the narrative will be discussed. In doing so, I will sketch a broad outline of the dichotomy of *Shahrestani* (provincial)/*Tehrani*, examining how this socio-urban conflict is fundamentally pertinent to the way in which the novel approaches the notion of the urban claim-making process.[207]

Although the two novels have fundamental differences in regard to their content as well as their narrative style, they both deal with the idea of urban space functioning as a setting of confrontational practices between various groups who inscribe their desired meanings and values on the body of the city.

The Right to the City in *Negaran nabash*

The previous chapter predominantly analyzed the observations of Shadi, *Negaran nabash*'s protagonist/*flâneuse*. In this chapter, I will focus more on the minor characters' narrative trajectories to discuss their roles in constructing the urbanite of Mohebbʿali's novel. One of the secondary characters to whom particular attention will be paid is Arash, the protagonist's younger brother. The significant role of his character is illustrated in the way in which the narrative is sequenced, as the beginning and end points are based on the different yet overlapping narrative paths from which these two characters, Shadi and Arash, begin and conclude their urban adventures. As such, at the outset of the narrative, Arash and Shadi engage in a relatively lengthy conversation, planning the day based on what they want to do. By the narrative's end, the two characters meet up again, recounting to each other what they have experienced throughout the day.

[206] The third chapter presents a plot summary and an overview of the novel's narrative features, see: pp 46–49.

[207] For a short biography of the authors and the reception of the novels, see the first chapter: pp. 21–27.

The following analysis, as mentioned earlier, will focus on Arash and his friends, as well as other minor characters of the novel, to address the urban claim they repeatedly refer to throughout the eventful day of the earthquake. Afterward, I will return to the novel's protagonist/*flâneuse*, examining how her urban adventure is entangled with that of Arash's crowd and how the discourse of the Right to the City is celebrated by the characters.

Before delving into the analysis, it is crucial to discuss characters' generational differences, as this plays a significant role in the oppositional urban discourse that is developed in the narrative.

Generational (Dis)connection

The first time the reader encounters the character of Arash is when her sister, Shadi, describes the frenzied situation of the house. Through Shadi's descriptions, it becomes clear that he is not the least bothered by, or worried about, the unfortunate circumstance of experiencing an earthquake. On the contrary, he is cheerful, wandering around the house in a jovial manner, humorously whistling a melody of the cantata of Carmina Burana while urinating in the bathroom.[208] He announces that all his friends are online and organizing a public meeting to reclaim Tehran: "the city is in our hands. All the cowards are running away."[209] When his sister, Shadi, the protagonist of the novel, asks him what he means by the discourse of reclaiming public spaces, he replies that the earthquake is like a dance performed by the city to expel the "cheating scumbags" from Tehran, and thus, the perfect opportunity to reclaim what has been theirs all along.[210] Arash belongs to the youngest generation of the novel's characters and is depicted as a free-spirited and reckless character with a readiness to confront his adversaries with hostility. In comparison with the behavior of other characters, furthermore, these specific tendencies and attributes of Arash's generation are more pronounced in the novel.

In *Negaran nabash*, four different generations of Iranian society are depicted: firstly, the generation of Shadi and Arash's parents, who were born during the 1960s. Nahid (the protagonist's mother), Parvin, and Azar (Nahid's friends) all belong to this group. Next is the generation of Babak, the protagonist's older brother, born in the 1970s. The narrator, Shadi, belongs to the generation called dahe-ye shasti, meaning "the generation of the sixties," as its members were born, based on the Iranian Hijri calendar, during the 1360s (corresponding to the

[208] Mahsa Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2008), 12.
[209] Ibid., 20.
[210] Ibid., 23

1980s). Finally, the protagonist's younger brother, Arash, and his friends represent the generation born during the 1990s.[211]

As mentioned earlier, the novel deals with the theme of generational differences by portraying characters who exhibit distinctive attitudes and mindsets, accentuating Mohebbʿali's notion of generation-specific behavior in the context of Iranian society. Babak, for instance, is mainly preoccupied throughout the novel with safeguarding his family. This cautiousness supposedly stems from his lived experience of the Iran-Iraq war during his adolescent years, which turned him into a hypervigilant person who assumes that the catastrophic situation of the earthquake has the potential to turn into an irremediable disaster. The older generation, conversely, who is represented in the novel by Parvin and Azar, are portrayed as characters who set the revolution in motion by participating in the protests against the Shah, yet they were excluded from the political scene in the newly established state.

Interestingly, one of Mohebbʿali's narratological strategies to elaborate on this theme is to link the concept of generations with space. As such, she offers the reader a palpable account of intergenerational issues. This is best captured in the episode during which the protagonist visits her old childhood friend, Sara. Sara lives in a decadent mansion, which the characters refer to *as ʿEmarat-e kolah farangi* (Kolah Farangi Mansion) that belonged to her great-grandmother.

Kolah Farangi refers to a specific architectural style in which decorative mansions in the shape of an octagonal dome were built in the garden. Several *Kolah farangi* mansions were constructed in Iran, especially during the Qajar period. In Tehran, however, there are only a few remaining mansions using this architectural style, most prominent of which are *ʿEmarat-e kolah farangi-ye bisim* built during the Pahlavi era, and *ʿEmarat-e kolah farangi*, also known as the Historical Mansion of *ʿEshrat abad*. Based on the information Mohebbʿali provides in the narrative, for instance, introducing Naser al-Din Shah as the first owner of the palace, it is probable that the protagonist visits the second mansion as part of her urban adventure.[212]

In Mohebbʿali's narrative, the building has an entirely different background compared to actual historical events. Sara's great-grandmother is introduced as one of Naser al-Din Shah's favorite wives (*sogoli*), inheriting the palace and passing it down to her children. Sara grew up in the mansion with her grandparents, as her parents were among the political prisoners who were imprisoned

[211] For a brief and general description of the demographic trends of generations in Iran, and the associated social factors, see: Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, "The Emergence of Independent Women in Iran: A Generational Perspective," in *Iranian Romance in the Digital Age: From Arranged Marriage to White Marriage*, ed. Janet Afary and Jesilyn Faust, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 11–32.

[212] The mansion of *ʿEshrat abad* was built in 1891 by the order of Naser al-Din Shah, and it served various purposes. The primary function of the four-story mansion was to be the *Harem* of Naser al-Din, hosting the king's wives. After the fall of the Qajar dynasty, the palace and garden were used as a military garrison during the Pahlavi era. Throughout the Islamic revolution in 1979, the palace was severely damaged by the protestors; its walls were marred by bullet holes.

and executed in the mass executions of 1988. After inheriting the ancestral palace, Sara turned the luxurious building into communal housing and invited several groups of her friends to live with her. The mansion, in this sense, embodies the fate of four generations of Iranian society: the great-grandmother who has left a legacy for her family, the grandparents who benefit from the inheritance, the parents whose life was tragically cut short since they could not enjoy the ancestral mansion, and lastly, Shadi and Sara. They, quite ironically, routinely smoke opium and fall into a stupor in the palace's great hall.

In light of the recurring theme of intergenerational differences, and in the following discussion, I will focus on the protagonist's generation together with Arash and his cohort, explaining how their characteristics intensify their urge to rally against those who govern and control Tehran.

Reclaiming the City amidst Chaos

As early as the novel's opening chapters, as mentioned earlier, Arash becomes an important character with his insouciant attitude. His impassioned speeches about reclaiming the city and his intention to fight for the cause develop into a relatively intense pursuit of claim-making when he finds his grandfather's old hunting gun and prepares it for the plausible confrontation ahead. Before taking the fight to the streets, however, Arash facetiously points the gun at various objects in their household, smashing his mother's pricey vintage porcelain into pieces with the butt of the gun.[213] This episode, on a symbolic level, already reveals one of the characteristics of Arash's generation: they benefit from the valuable legacy of the past generation, yet they do not constrain themselves to be necessarily deferential to the issues that do not interest them. Shortly after this incident, the protagonist leaves the house, and the narrative focuses more on her experience in the city. Arash's character, thereafter, only appears once again in the novel's concluding chapter. I will return to this encounter later, arguing that the two narrative trajectories merge at this point through the dialogues between the protagonist and her brother. In doing so, the novel mediates upon the characters' generationally differentiated urban demands, both of which are thwarted by the city officials.

It is important to note that although Arash appears only at the beginning and at the end of the narrative, other representatives of his generation recurrently emerge, repeating the same urban rhetoric to which Arash also referred, that is, reclaiming the city. This claim, the yearning for possessing and retaining the city, is echoed so frequently in the novel, and Mohebbʿali's emphasis on it is so clear that any analysis of the story would be inadequate without exploring what the characters mean by this claim and how it is related to the Iranian society.

[213] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 33.

The social dimension of the aforementioned reclaiming the urban space is best captured in the episode in which the protagonist comes in contact with some young protestors who operate as a grassroots community. This scene is narrated while the protagonist/*flâneuse* finds her way through the disordered city and reports on various people in the streets who are demonstrating their frustration by chanting political slogans. Unexpectedly, she recognizes her grandmother among the protestors, violently being taken away by the police by force. The narrator becomes anxious and intends to help her grandmother, but she is hemmed inside the crowd and faints. Subsequently, she is rescued by the protestors, who take her to an abandoned shopping center that they use as their underground base. Once she is revived, the protagonist describes the members of the group focusing on the most prominent feature of their physical appearance: "pineapple head boy" (referring to his unusual hairstyle), "acne-faced boy," "the boy who looks like Osama bin Ladan" (referring to the long beard), "shaved-head guy with tattooed arms," and "beautiful ponytailed-girl."[214] Interestingly, throughout their frequently interrupted dialogues with the protagonist, they all declare that they aim to take control of the city, deploying the same urban-related rhetoric Arash used in the novel's earlier chapters.

Shadi is worried about her grandmother and inquires about which *bazdashtgah* (lock-up) the police took her to. The long-bearded boy, however, dismisses her concern, boastfully asserting that by tomorrow his group will own the city: "it is not clear [where your grandmother is]. Don't worry. The city is in our hands. If she lasts till tomorrow morning, all will be fine."[215] Meanwhile, the other passionate members of the group strategize to take back some areas of Tehran and proclaim their possession of it: "the word is Resalat street is also in our hand," "we should go to Vanak square; we are wasting our time here," "what should we do about Shemrun neighborhood?"[216] The concluding reassurance, nevertheless, comes from the boy with tattooed arms and a stocky body: "the city is in our hands, don't worry."[217] Even the protagonist, at this point, is slightly confused by the repetitive discourse of reclaiming the city: "this would good if only I could understand what 'the city is in our hands' actually means."[218]

In this sense, and in the context of earthquake-stricken Tehran of *Negaran nabash*, the pursuit of the inhabitants to reclaim their city can be best referred to as "a cry and a demand" for their unrecognized rights, in its Lefebvrian sense.[219] As mentioned earlier, his concept of the Right to the City maintains that inhabitants of a city should be part of the process of urban management, emphasizing that urban resources should be accessible to everyone. As such, Lefebvre's theory is essentially a quest against urban marginalization and social segregation.

[214] Ibid., 76–80.
[215] Ibid., 78.
[216] Ibid., 78, 79.
[217] Ibid., 79
[218] Ibid.
[219] Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 174.

The recurrent declaration of claiming the city in *Negaran nabash* echoes the similar ambition towards which Lefebvre's deprived urban society ventures. Fueled by the mobilizing power stemming from their alienation, marginalization, and exclusions, the novel's characters become determined to assert their rights to the city. The narrative, in this respect, approaches the idea of the right to the city by depicting an urban environment liberated from the hegemonic control over the city by the government. Because of this, the opportunities of the city have been extended to a mass of Tehran's citizenry on this particular day, enabling them to come to the streets and demand something from the city officials.

In this respect, inhabitants' varying demands are underpinned by their distinctive lived experiences and, most importantly, their generational differences. This is most closely elaborated upon through the urban discourse of Arash's generation, which, as pointed out, is shaped by a claim-making exercise toward the city's public spaces. The episode of the abandoned shopping center, for instance, illustrates these characters' scale of alienation from the city's public realm. The characters' marginality is subtly conveyed through the concise description offered by the protagonist regarding their physical characteristics, as Mohebbʿali hardly provides any more information about the protestors; even their names are not mentioned. Instead, they are referred to with a singular noun denoting a visible marker in their appearances, such as uncustomary hairstyles or heavily tattooed bodies, which are not socially accepted or in line with social norms. The young protestor, for example, who is in the shopping center and later gives Shadi a ride on his motorbike, and thus, has a relatively extended presence in the narrative, is merely called "the ponytailed boy" in the protagonist's focalizing point of view.[220]

This character is also singled out in another narrative episode to construct the novel's oppositional and generation-specific urban discourse. In this scene, the boy drives his motorbike through several floral displays at a pedestrian crossing which incites the objection of a senior citizen, who aggressively accuses the boy of not having a proper upbringing. The young protestor, enraged, confronts him:

> بینم داش، تو که داری می‌زنی به چاک، واسه دررفتنت هم ریدی تو کوچه و خیابون، دیگه چه کار داری که من چی کار دارم می‌کنم؟ شهرمه داداش، حال می‌کنم گلا رولگد کنم. حال می‌کنم بزنم در و دیوارو داغون کنم. اصلا حال می‌کنم برینم توش. ناراحتی؟ وایسا از شهرت مراقبت کن. مردش هستی؟
>
> Hey dude, you're just running away and you've been shitting everywhere in the streets, is it any of your business what I choose to do? It's my city, man. I feel like stomping on the flowers. I feel like destroying everything. I even feel like shitting on the city. If you're unhappy, stay and take care of your city. Are you man enough to do it? [221]

[220] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 84.

[221] Ibid.

The protagonist describes the look in the old man's eyes upon hearing these sentences as utterly bewildered, incapable of understanding the young protestor's hostile speech. In other words, the old man, representing two generations before, is incognizant of the young protestor's frustration and claim-making rhetoric.

The intergenerational dispute is reiterated in another passage in which the protagonist meets Parvin, her mother's old friend and former communist who has embraced the mayhem of the city and sings revolutionary anthems in a microphone. Parvin is oblivious to the horrific violence surrounding her.[222] Neither afraid of the disarray nor willing to defuse the situation, Parvin stays aloof and continues her own urban adventure. While describing Parvin and her singing episode, the protagonist is concerned that the police special forces may arrive at any moment. Accordingly, she is tempted to leave the sheltered spot to prevent her mother's old friend from singing further. She changes her mind, does not move, and justifies her conduct and that of Parvin with this internal dialogue: "Let her be...she is enjoying this...do you know how many years she has not sung these anthems?"[223]

The significant point highlighted in the above quote in regard to the notion of the Right to the City is the emphasis on the longevity of the politico-spatial control to which Tehran's citizenry has been subjected. In this respect, every character of *Negaran nabash* seizes the conundrum of the city for the overdue demands: the protagonist wanders around the city without wearing a hijab and embraces the opportunity to walk around and observe her city, to be a *flâneuse*. Parvin, as illustrated, takes advantage of the day's events to revive and reinvigorate her leftist political ideologies. Lastly, and most drastically, Arash, and other young people of his generation, strategize to reclaim the city.

Quite interestingly, although other characters regard Arash's generation as idle and indolent, they are the only group who incessantly and determinedly, throughout the narrative, pursues their collective right. They use online platforms beforehand, for instance, to mobilize and organize protests in multiple locations. This disaffected mass, their urban demonstrations, and their unleashed frustration are like "an expansive political project," whose outcome involves both the city and its inhabitants becoming "a potent source of protest and possibility," which is precisely what Lefebvre meant by his concept of the Right to the City.[224]

The narrative of *Negaran nabash*, thereby, deals with the idea of the Right to the City from the broader perspective of social marginalization of some groups of inhabitants and political pressure executed by the authorities. While the author's particular emphasis on this theme is obvious, some interpretations of the novel overlook how power relations are represented in the novel. For instance,

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[222] This episode takes place simultaneously when a bully thrusts his dagger at other inhabitants, the details of which I analyzed in the third chapter, see: p. 56.

[223] Ibid., 119.

[224] Alex Vasudevan, "Re-Imagining the Squatted City," in *The Right to the City: A Verso Report*, Verso Reports (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 114.

Blake Atwood, a media studies scholar focusing on Iranian cultural products, rejects the possibility of any political act being depicted in these narratives in his analyses of *Negaran nabash* and two other novels.[225] To illustrate his claim, to which he refers as the "political inaction of youth," he examines a passage in which a group of young characters gleefully chants in celebration after taking control of a neighborhood.[226] In a festive mood, they sing a modified version of a poem titled Pariya (The Fairies), one of the most famous and politically-laden poems of Ahmad Shamlu, the renowned Iranian writer and poet. In the following section, I will first describe how the protagonist narrates the scene and what her observations are. Subsequently, I will elaborate on how the original poem is altered to conform to the characters' celebration in *Negaran nabash*. After discussing Atwood's viewpoint about this particular scene, I will offer my own stance on the politically relevant aspects of the narrative regarding present-day Iranian society.

The City is Our City: Urbanite's Paradoxical Pursuits

In the above-mentioned scene, the protagonist encounters a group of boys and girls whom she refers to as finches, emphasizing that they are merely juveniles. The narrator then describes that a young boy, presumably the group's leader, jumps on a car roof and announces: "Guys! Narmak Square has also fallen...the city is in our hands."[227]

This statement suggests that the group belongs to Arash's cohort, as they refer to the generationally shared urban motto of reclaiming the city. They are ecstatic that they can assert their position in the city, reclaiming another part of the public space. Commemorating the good news, some group members carry others on their backs and burst into a spontaneous singalong of the altered version of Shamlu's poem:

> پسرها فنچ ها را قلمدوش می‌کنند. فنچ ها دست ها را بالای سر می‌برند و دم می‌گیرند: «شهر شهر ماست یار گله داره...سیاهی حق ماست یار گله داره.» دو سه تا از اواهایشان می‌پرند وسط و قرهای عربی می‌دهند و فنچ‌ها هم وسطشان می‌لوند.
>
> The boys give the finches [shorter people] piggyback rides. The finches raise their hands above their heads and chant: "The city is our city, the friend is vexed... blackness is our right, the friend is vexed." Two gays jump in the middle of the crowd and do a dance in an Arabic style, and the finches dance around.[228]

[225] Blake Atwood, "Tehran's Textual Topography: Mapping Youth Culture in Contemporary Persian Literature," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 35 (2015), 146.

[226] Ibid.

[227] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 73

[228] Ibid., 73–74.

The original verse, written by Shamlu, is as follows: "whiteness is king, the monster is vexed, blackness is shamed, the monster is vexed."[229] As such, in the modified version, which is chanted by characters of *Negaran nabash* in the above paragraph, two important elements have been changed. The characters declare that blackness is what they are after; it is their right, and they also state that their victory will displease the friend and not the monster. These two changes are also mentioned in Atwood's analysis of the above passage, since he argues that Shamlu's poem in *Negaran nabash* has been inversed and depoliticized and demonstrates the lack of resistance among young people. Atwood suggests that in Mohebbʿali's narrative, "blackness is no longer a source of shame; instead, it is "our right," and the friend—not the monster—is vexed." He parallels this argument with the original poem, which, in his opinion, "approaches the idea of capturing the city as a battle between white and black, good and evil," but "in *Negaran nabash*, the city's fall is a celebration of chaos."[230]

Indeed, *Negaran nabash* is the celebration of chaos, yet not in the arbitrary, depoliticized, and passive manner that Atwood concludes through his main discussion. As I will argue in detail, Atwood fails to consider the young characters' background in Mohebbʿali's narrative, and he also overlooks the contradictory semiotic pertinence of Shamlu's poem, which reflects the complexity of liberation struggles in the Iranian sociopolitical scene. In order to address this issue, which is reflected in both *Negaran nabash* and the poem, I will elaborate on Shamlu's poetic expression in regard to the intricacy of sociopolitical processes. Afterward, in light of the theoretical discussions of this chapter, I will analyze how this issue is related to the young characters of *Negaran nabash* and their generation-specific political struggle against urban governance.

Shamlu's poem, written in the tumultuous years following the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, recounts the story of a horseman encountering three weeping fairies by a roadside leading to *Shahr-e gholamha-ye asir* (The city of captive slaves). The horseman asks the fairies why they are distressed, but the mythical creatures remain silent and continue crying. To alleviate their sorrow, the man talks about the imminent victory of the enslaved inhabitants, describing the cheerful atmosphere of the city once it is liberated from the tyrant's oppression, a character he refers to as *ʿAmu zanjirbaf* (Uncle Chain-Maker). The fairies' indifference to these promising words arouses the suspicion of the horseman, and he realizes that the creatures are not, in the least, benevolent or innocent—the wicked fairies have

[229] Whiteness is king, the monster is vexed سفیدی پادشاس، دیب گله داره

Blackness is shamed, the monster is vexed. سیاهی روسیاست، دیب گله داره

For the original poem, see: Ahmad Shamlu, "Pariya," in Hava-Ye Tazeh (Tehran: Nil, 1976), 89.

[230] Atwood, "Tehran's Textual Topography,"147.

been attempting all the while to prevent him from reaching the city. The horseman then fights them and, afterward, rides towards the city, where he witnesses people celebrating their freedom.[231]

In Persian folk tales, the figure of the Pari (fairy) has been predominantly depicted as a symbol of beauty whose supernatural abilities help the hero in accomplishing his journey.[232] Although Shamlu's piece, as Karimi-Hakkak notes, is a "folk-inspired" poem that masterfully deploys the features of the genre to such an extent that it indeed became a "landmark in modern Persian poetry," the characters of the fairies in this poem are not analogous to those of classical fairytales.[233] Shamlu's fairies in the poem, at first blush, appear to be innocuous, while the narrator of the poem seeks to assuage their suffering. But once their evil nature is revealed, they metamorphose into three obstacles to thwart the horseman's journey: one becomes a jug of wine that the man drinks, the next one turns into a sea through which he must traverse, and the last one transforms into a mountain, which the determined horseman must ascend to reach the city.

On the other hand, the figure of Uncle Chain-Maker, who is based on a traditional Iranian children's game with the same title, is introduced in the narrative as a character who builds chains to keep the inhabitants enslaved. This differs from his benevolent role in the children's game *ʿAmu zanjirbaf*, in which the players form a circle holding hands and chant rhythmically to address the character of the Uncle, or *ʿAmu*. *ʿAmu zanjirbaf*, according to the lyrics of the song they chant, is a symbol of vernal bloom, since he can break the chains of the cold that dominates the earth throughout the winter by throwing it behind a black mountain, delivering the pleasure of spring to the anticipative children.[234]

Shamlu's semiotic repertoire in The Fairies, hence, contradicts the traditional representations of these two figures. The Pariya are not helpful characters, and Uncle Chain-Maker is not an agent of prosperity, since the fairies deceive and the Uncle enslaves. The thematic core of the poem, nevertheless, embodies the struggles of political emancipation in the context of Iranian society, which is foregrounded through the articulation of the character of *ʿAmu* as a tyrannical power on one side, and the city inhabitants' struggle for freedom on the other. Interestingly, the city is initially introduced in the poem as the city of captive people, but when it is released from the control of the oppressor by the poem's end, its name also changes to the city of people.

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[231] For a more detailed summary and a brief analysis of Shamlu's poem, see: Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "A Well Amid the Waste: An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu" in *A Fire of Lilies: Perspectives on Literature and Politics in Modern Iran*, Iranian Studies Series (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019), 135–51.

[232] Ulrich Marzolph, "Persian Popular Literature," in *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages, Companion II: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik.*, ed. Philip G Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2010), 225.

[233] Karimi-Hakkak, "A Well Amid the Waste," 139 & 145.

[234] Mohammad Hadi Mohammadi and Zahra Qayini, *Tarikh-e adabiyat-e kudakan-e Iran*, 1 (Tehran: Chista, 2001), 39.

In Shamlu's poem, therefore, the characters' backgrounds and the way they are portrayed in the lyrics are contradictory. There is a paradox between how the characters of the fairies are delineated in classical narratives, and how Shamlu approaches them as deceiving figures. This, in turn, can also be suggestive of the intricacy of the dynamics of social repression and political change in Iran, since the poet suggests that the figures, which may at first seem to be benevolent, can actually be part of the authority's strategy to prevent people from obtaining freedom. Given this context, "despite certain ambiguities," as Karimi-Hakkak argues, the poem The Fairies is essentially political in nature and can be interpreted as "the prophecy of an imminent revolution."[235] Therefore, contrary to Atwood's observation of the poem, The Fairies, in itself, is an amalgam of paradoxically constructed figures, indicating the complex nature of political reality and social resistance.

A similar literary strategy of using ambiguous language and paradoxically articulated motifs are also deployed in the narrative of *Negaran nabash*. In this respect, the characters who sing the altered version of the poem are all marginalized by the existing exclusionary urban governance; city officials have not recognized their subculture, lifestyle, and desires, so the young group benefits from the mayhem caused by the earthquake to lay claim to their city's public spaces. By altering Shamlu's poem, replacing the monster with friend and whiteness with blackness, I argue that they actually remain faithful to the original poem's semiotic structure: who is a friend in Tehran and who is not? Can the authority (represented in the novel by the special unit of the police) be conceived of as friends, or are they, on the contrary, evil-spirited figures? To whom does the city belong, these young characters or to the ruling power? In order to clarify this issue and address these questions, I will analyze selected excerpts of the novel that highlight the reason behind the contradictory nature of Arash's generations' rhetoric of claim-making practices in urban space.

De-familiarizing Urban Rights

As discussed above, in Shamlu's poem, once the city inhabitants are liberated, they express their cheerfulness by chanting, "whiteness is king, the monster is vexed." The young protestors of *Negaran nabash*, however, sing an altered verse of the poem: "The city is our city, the friend (yar) is vexed."[236] In this sense, the word monster is replaced with the friend. The word "Yar" used in the original Persian text is also an interesting choice, as it has multiple related meanings. In classical literature, for instance, it usually refers to the character of the lover. The word is also used to describe a trustful companion or like-minded friend. In either case, the word strongly connotes human connections based on fidelity, fondness, and benevolence. In this sense, Atwood is not entirely wrong to assume that the

[235] Karimi-Hakkak, "A Well Amid the Waste," 145.

[236] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 74.

characters of *Negaran nabash* are purposeless anarchists, since they are only satisfied when the Yar is annoyed. Yet, we need to consider how the notion of Yar is developed in the novel. In the sociopolitical milieu of Iranian urban spaces, which character is the sole credible agent, nurturing and perpetuating other citizens' interests?

The answer to this question is highlighted in the title of the novel itself. Once the authorities are able to resume their control over the city, a police officer holds a megaphone and addresses the bewildered inhabitants: "Don't be afraid, everything is under control…keep calm."[237] The expression Don't be afraid is usually uttered by an attentive companion, a Yar, to convey a sense of reassurance to someone in distress. Nevertheless, this phrase communicates a gloomy, if not frightening, connotation at this point in the narrative. The city inhabitants know only too well that the sentence "everything is under control" also has a double meaning, as it is shortly before this scene that the protagonist/*flâneuse* describes how control is re-established over the city by observing an ostensibly calm yet exceedingly horrifying situation of the city:

> توی پیاده رو سی چهل تا پسر را دست‌بند زده‌اند و روی زانو خوابانده‌اند. مامورهای گارد ویژه ایستاده‌اند جلو در و باتوم‌هایشان را به نرده‌ها می‌کوبند و گاهی هواری می‌کشند تا پسرها اینقدر زنجموره و التماس نکنند.
>
> Thirty or forty boys were handcuffed and on their knees on the sidewalk. Special force officers stood in front of the door, banging their batons on the fences, and sometimes letting out a roar so that the boys would not cry out or plead so much.[238]

The description of the terror-stricken young boys on the sidewalk and the ruthless behavior of the officers in the above excerpt denotes the ironic usage of the expression "Don't be afraid" by authorities in the subsequent episode, since order in the city is reinstated, but only by forcefully eliminating the protestors and disregarding the demands related to the changes they want to see in the city. In this respect, there is hypocrisy in what the authority promises and what it executes. Therefore, when the slogan-chanting youngsters call for blackness and assume that the friend would be vexed, it is because in a city like Tehran as represented in *Negaran nabash* and the imaginary city of Shamlu's poem, the lines are blurred. The fairies come to be wicked, the group claiming to be gracious may injure, and the values regarded as altruistic may exclude and marginalize others. The city, in this case, is a locus of an internal and direct political conflict to dominate (on the authority's side) and to reclaim and assert withheld rights (on the inhabitants' side). As such, it is not surprising that the young protesters, given that they have been excluded from the city they have inhabited their entire lives, demand the opposite of what has been offered to them as state-endorsed values.

[237] Ibid., 139.
[238] Ibid., 135.

As extensively discussed in the second chapter, the concept of the Right to the City promotes holistic citizen engagement and criticizes exclusionary urban policies, which marginalize underprivileged inhabitants. Lefebvre's theory, in this respect, is "a struggle to "de-alienate" urban space, to reintegrate it into the web of social connections."[239] Interestingly, one of the ways this can be practiced, according to Lefebvre, is collective urban celebrations, such as festivals. As a politically left-leaning scholar, Lefebvre considered festivals an opportunity that "could erupt on an urban street or in an alienated factory. The festival was a pure spontaneous moment, a popular 'safety valve,' a catharsis for everyday passions and dreams, something both liberating and antithetical."[240]

Quite significantly, Mohebb'ali introduces this cathartic aspect of a festival-like atmosphere in the city after the earthquake as a primary narrative force. The novel beings with people celebrating their temporary freedom in their own ways, which are, at times, violent and "antithetical." The novel ends once the order has been restored. Describing the emancipatory efforts of the inhabitants, the author delineates the Tehran of *Negaran nabash* as a city where alternative urban life, although desired, is prevented. Because of this, the city inhabitants do not consider the chaos of the aftershocks as a threat. As it is, in some sense, an opportunity for them to arrange a fest: "against safety, and against security, at least as it is conceived in the contemporary city defined by the fear of public space [...], a world out of control, a world where the disempowered are empowered, and where safety and security take a back seat to joy and creativity—and to radically transformed geographical contexts."[241]

The upside-down Tehran of Mohebb'ali's novel is radical and occasionally paradoxical and confusing, as was the case, for example, with the appropriation of Shamlu's poem as a political slogan. Nevertheless, this is what Lefebvre intended for his concept: "a movement to go beyond the existing city," a celebration in which no urban dream is degraded, demonstrating the possible city.[242] In this possible Tehran, the protagonist/*flâneuse* possesses a spectatorial authority over her city; she can wander around the streets without being worried about the disapproving eyes of its inhabitants. The former political activist, Parvin, is able to promote her left-wing values and chant revolutionary songs with impunity. Arash and others of his generation are free to assert their presence and nurture the ambition to build a city that is, at least to some extent, theirs.

By the end of the narrative, as discussed in the previous chapter, with re-establishing the authority over the city, Shadi is again the object of other inhabitants' gaze: she is, for example, criticized for her uncustomary appearance by some

[239] Mark Purcell, "Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36, no. 1 (February 2014), 149.

[240] Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 17.

[241] Don Mitchell, "Against Safety, Against Security: Reinvigorating Urban Life," in *Fleeing the City*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2009), 242.

[242] Purcell, "Possible Worlds," 150.

women, since the opium addiction is visible on her face, and she also wears an oversized coat and a beanie. At this point, the final meeting of Arash and Shadi, which I referred to earlier in this chapter, takes place. After having spent an adventurous day, the siblings recount to each other what they have experienced. Despite admitting that his plan for reclaiming the city has not succeeded, Arash is nevertheless cheerful. He has chosen a remote corner of the square, an abandoned fish store, as his shelter. He mentions his plan to decorate the place anew with vivid colors and a sofa so he can sit and observe people. The protagonist skeptically disapproves of the fish's foul odor, indicating that his future corner is not the most desirable spot that one could obtain in the city. After this conversation, however, the protagonist also takes shelter underground in the city, near the square's wastewater channels, trying a new drug that Arash offered her. Mohebbʿali ends the novel with these lines: "a tired and hybrid sound is singing a folklore song...no...he doesn't sing. He moans a folklore song. I gulp and swallow the bitterness."[243] The stark contrast between the vibrant narrative tone of the earlier chapters and these closing lines consequently reinforces the gloomy closure to the characters' adventures: they started their journey from the concealed spaces to which they had been banished, and in the end, they have retreated even further into the margins of the city.

As indicated previously, Mohebbʿali's narrative mainly addresses the idea of the Right to the City in its political sense. Yet, urban claim-making practices can also be expressed in tensions among inhabitants with varying social classes or backgrounds. In the following section, I will explore this latter point by discussing Zahra ʿAbdi's novel, *Natamami*. I will present a plot summary and introduce the novel's narrative and thematic features, and then explore how the discourse of the claim to the city is addressed by diverse characters of the story.

Secrets of the Labyrinthine City in *Natamami*

Plot Summary

The novel's protagonist, Solmaz Solati, is a master's student in Persian literature. She is originally from Ahar, a relatively small city in East Azerbaijan Province. Solmaz lives in a dormitory in Tehran and tries to manage her life while living alone in the city and away from her familiar surroundings.

The novel begins with a shocking event, when Solmaz's roommate, a young girl named Liyan Jofreyi, disappears. Originally from Bushehr, a port city in southwest Iran, Liyan worked for a non-profit organization in Tehran alongside her studies, helping with the education of juveniles who were subjected to child labor. In order to find Liyan, Solmaz ventures out into the mysterious parts of the city and goes to the places Liyan has been. One of the communities that Liyan specifically advocated for through her volunteer work was the Gypsy community,

[243] Mohebbʿali, *Negaran nabash*, 147.

and she gradually became involved in the personal problems of affected members. In pursuing Liyan's whereabouts, Solmaz encounters several people from the gypsy community who had been in contact with her friend.

The protagonist's mother, who still lives in Ahar, constantly contacts her and interferes with her daughter's life in the city. She is concerned that Tehran is a dangerous place and wishes that her daughter would get married to one of the protagonist's cousins, who also lives in the capital city. These interventions do not prevent Solmaz from continuing her quest to find her missing friend. In the end, however, Solmaz does not succeed in locating her, and the narrative does not provide any information regarding Liyan's destiny.

Main Features

The novel consists of 23 chapters and each section's focus rotates alternately between the protagonist and her missing friend. The protagonist narrates the parts concerning her life events, but the chapters recounting the fate of Liyan are narrated by an omniscient narrator, which allows the reader to access to not only Liyan's feelings and contemplations but also to those of the other characters.

Both main characters of the novel are graduate students of Persian literature and their university curriculum includes various courses about literary genres and narratives. Accordingly, mythical allegories are incorporated into the narrative to render an engaging account of the characters' feelings and their states of mind. As was mentioned in the introduction of this book, the author herself is a graduate of Persian literature and integrates classical mythology in her novel in order to develop her characters using a more sophisticated literary approach.

The majority of these mythical allegories are deployed to describe Solmaz's dreams. One key literary technique in *Natamami* is the lengthy descriptions of her mythical-based dreams and visions, sometimes extending through several pages of the novel. In the protagonist's meditative reveries, the epic of Gilgamesh plays a vital role, as her focalization is constantly filtered through references to the epic poem. On several occasions, for example, she compares her predicaments to those of Gilgamesh. The protagonist goes so far as to even declare Liyan as her Enkidu, Gilgamesh's companion whose death inspired him to start his journey in pursuit of immortality. Accordingly, she indicates that the disappearance of Liyan also prompts her journey through Tehran. Quite interestingly, the monstrous character of the epic, Humbaba, is also incarnated in Solmaz's fantasies, and she detects a personified equivalent of the figure in her social circle: the dean at the university who was a ruthless adversary of Liyan:

او [لیان] برخلاف افسانه‌هایی که برایش ساخته‌اند، نتوانست غول آتش‌خوار، رییس گروه دانشکده، هوم‌بابا معروف به دکتر جعفری را از تخت ریاست پایین بکشد.

> Unlike the fables being recited about her, she [Enkidu/Liyan] could not defeat the fire-breathing beast, the head of the faculty, Humbaba, known as Dr. Jaʿfari.[244]

Regarding the mythical allegory and its function in the novel, it is also important to point out that the protagonist acknowledges that she is not the same gender as Gilgamesh, who is considered to be one-third male and two-thirds divine.[245] This difference, however, does not prevent her from completely identifying with him, as Gilgamesh is, in the protagonist's dreams and visions, a woman. In one instance, the narrator recounts a dream in which her firm conviction of being Gilgamesh settles the historical debates over the gender of the Mesopotamian hero:

> با این‌که زنم، هفت طبقه ریش مجعد دارم. من خود خود گیل گمشم. با این‌که دختری محتاط و حتا تاحدی ترسوی هستم، اما طبق نقاشی‌های به جا مانده از الواح گلی، شیری وحشی هم زیر بغل زده‌ام. توی آینه نگاه می‌کنم. سینه‌هایم زیر زره‌ای که بر تن کرده‌ام معلوم نیست. شاید برای همین باستان‌شناسان گمان کرده‌اند که من مردم.
>
> Although I am a woman, I have seven layers of curly beard. I am exactly Gilgamesh. According to the paintings on the clay tablets, I am a cautious and cowardly girl; nevertheless, I carry a wild lion under my arm. I look in the mirror. My breasts are not apparent under the armor I have worn. Maybe that is the reason why archaeologists thought that I was a man.[246]

In summary, I have introduced the main topic of the narrative in this section, presenting an overview of the main character's background while briefly discussing the author's literary strategy of deploying elements of classical mythology. In the following section, I will extensively analyze the two main characters' differences and similarities, especially their provincial roots. In doing so, I delve more directly into how the social dynamics in the urban space of Tehran are embedded in ʿAbdi's narrative.

Shahrestani/*Tehrani* Dichotomy in *Natamami*

From its opening lines, the narrative introduces the protagonist's main motive as her search for Liyan, the missing roommate. As the narrative proceeds, however, it is revealed that the two characters had a relatively complicated relationship, given their different personalities. Solmaz, for instance, frequently

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[244] ʿAbdi, *Natamami*, 8.

[245] For a detailed examination of the epic of Gilgamesh, and other Mesopotamian texts, from a gendered perspective, see: Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

[246] ʿAbdi, *Natamami*, 7.

thinks about their intense arguments and even suspects that they were not randomly-assigned roommates, and in fact, the dormitory staff intentionally paired them together:

> من، دختر تبریزی با نخوت و اعصاب‌ندار را آوردند کنار لیان، دختر خوش‌مشرب و بساز، تا آدم بشوم. من با هیچ‌کس نمی‌ساختم. انگار همه توطئه‌ای در سرداشتند. مرا هم‌اتاقی لیان کردند تا مدارا یاد بگیرم.
>
> They assigned a room to me –the arrogant, agonized girl from Tabriz, and Liyan—the sociable and easygoing girl, so that maybe I would change. I did not get along with anyone. It was as if everyone was plotting in their minds. They assigned me as Liyan's roommate so that I would learn tolerance.[247]

As the narrative unfolds, these differences are more obvious, given the information about the characters' personalities. Solmaz is career-oriented, and she aspires to be admitted to a doctoral program at the university. In order to achieve this goal, she is even willing to tolerate sexually-charged conversations with the ill-reputed Dr. Ja'fari, also known as the Humbaba of her nightmares. Liyan, on the other hand, is more focused on her work at the organization, and her aloofness toward developing her career is reflected in her decision to initiate an affair with a professor at the university. That her lover, Mr. Shamsayi, is an Islamic cleric makes the affair all the more perilous, as Liyan admits that social norms are a significant hurdle for establishing a proper relationship with him: "it is so easy to fall in love with someone who, given his clothes, you can't even walk down the street with."[248] In the end, however, none of these complications is important for Liyan, who is deeply infatuated with Shamsayi and is determined to continue the affair illicitly.

Another significant difference between Liyan and Solmaz is the length of time that they stay in Tehran. While Liyan moved to the city six years ago, Solmaz has only lived in the capital city for two years. As such, Solmaz is predominantly presented as a character who has led a relatively sheltered urban life, mainly preoccupied and obsessed with her education and career prospects. Liyan, conversely, and as it will be discussed in detail in this chapter, is portrayed as having navigated her way much farther through the urban labyrinth. This means she has had more adventures in the city, and knows the geography of the city better than Solmaz. Nevertheless, despite these differences, Liyan and Solmaz both identify themselves as *Shahrestani* (provincial) girls in Tehran. In this respect, it is important to clarify the meaning of this term, what *Shahrestani* refers to, and why the two characters frequently use it to define themselves.

The closest translation of the word, as mentioned in the parenthesis, is provincial. Nevertheless, it does not exactly capture the meaning of *Shahrestani* in the context of Iranian society. It is important to note that Ahar and Bushehr, the

[247] Ibid., 15.

[248] Ibid., 39.

characters' hometowns, are by no means small countryside or rural areas. Nevertheless, the urban planning process in Iran has created a particular situation due to the extreme centralization of Tehran's economic and power structure. This center-periphery structure has resulted in a massive migration from other rural/urban areas to Tehran in recent decades to such an extent that city planners and urban scholars have been critical of the alarming population density in Tehran and have advocated for a decentralization strategy. In addition to many economic consequences, mass migration also resulted in deep social tensions and a growing cultural conflict between the locals and the newcomers to the city. In this sense, some residents who were born or grew up in Tehran identify as *Tehrani*, claiming authoritative ownership of the city, its resources, and its cultural image. This can lead to the exclusion of the newcomers to the capital city, known as *Shahrestani*s. Some members of the first group go so far as to criticize and provoke the latter for not being accustomed to the *Tehrani* urban etiquette and values. As a result, The *Shahrestani*/*Tehrani* dichotomy not only hints at an individual's geographical origin but also indicates a deeper socio-cultural conflict. [249] The power relations between *Shahrestani* and *Tehrani* communities are one of the constituent narrative forces of the novel. The protagonist refers to this issue on several occasions, expressing her sense of isolation in Tehran as a provincial girl:

> امروز جای خالی لیان در کلاس اسطوره‌شناسی به من فهماند، گیل گمش بودن، جنگیدن با هوم‌بابا غول آتش‌خوار، خیلی راحت‌تر است از یک دختر دانشجوی شهرستانی بودن در تهران. خیلی راحت‌تر از من سولماز صولتی بودن است.
>
> Today, Liyan's absence in class made me understand that being Gilgamesh and fighting with Humbaba, the fire-breathing beast, is much easier than being a female *Shahrestani* student in Tehran. Much easier than being me, Solmaz Solati.[250]

In the excerpt above, not only does the protagonist reflect on the complications of being a non-*Tehrani* girl in the capital city, but she also mentions her own name for the first time in the narrative. In other words, ʿAbdi's first introductory passage about her protagonist suggests the extent to which her character identifies as a *Shahrestani* girl. The narrative invites the reader to observe Tehran through the point of view of a young girl who neither feels entirely alienated from her urban surroundings nor considers herself completely immersed in the *Tehrani*an urban population.

The protagonist's struggle in the capital city as a non-*Tehrani* is partly related to the discrimination she is subjected to by the local community. This catalyzes the character's fixation on the idea of relocation and the subsequent out-

[249] For ethnographic implications of *Shahrestani/Tehrani* dichotomy, see: Azar Tashakkor, *Tehrani-Shahrestani* (Tehran: ʿElmi va Farhangi, 2020).

[250] ʿAbdi, *Natamami*, 7.

come of being marginalized in a new environment. Solmaz, for instance, is obsessed with any news concerning her former partner (Panah), who has immigrated to Sweden by way of a fake marriage to a middle-aged woman. The protagonist frequently stalks his profile on social media, comparing her own situation with Panah's. Throughout these observations, the protagonist uses the Persian word Kuch (meaning moving/traveling from one home/place to another). At one point, Solmaz ruminates over the Gypsy community's replacement history, recounting that twelve thousand members were forced to leave India and move to Iran. Associating this historical episode to her own experience of relocation, as well as Panah's journey, the protagonist remarks:

> اصلا هرکسی که مجبور شود از جایی به جایی کوچ کند، خودش را از خودش جا می‌گذارد و می‌شود دیگری و دیگری یعنی تویی که تصمیم می‌گیرد چه‌قدر از خودت، ته کاسه‌ات، باقی بماند. یاد پناه می‌افتم. ازدواج صوری با آن زن دلخواهش بود یا نه؟
>
> Anyone forced to move from one place to another leaves herself behind, and becomes another person. This other person then decides how much of you remains at the bottom of your bowl. I remember Panah. Did he desire a fake marriage with that woman or not?[251]

Interestingly, the protagonist's new partner, Jahangir, shares a similar destiny with Panah. By the novel's end, he is diagnosed with a terminal disease and has to leave Iran for England to receive better medical treatment. Even though Jahangir reassures Solmaz that he will return and that this relocation is not permanent, Solmaz is certain that is not the case: "they say we will back, but almost no one who leaves comes back."[252]

Although the protagonist's personal *kuch* and the marginality she experiences in Tehran deeply agonize her, she is certain of her unwillingness to relocate back to her hometown. She persistently explores her options to extend her stay in the city, stating that participating in a Ph.D. Program is her last chance "to remain in the tempting embrace of a whore named Tehran."[253]

As with the protagonists of other novels studied in this book, her desire for Tehran is not affectionate. It is instead because the city provides her with an opportunity for adventure, as she is not constrained by the conservative attitudes of the family environment. In the following section, I will elaborate on this matter, exploring why, despite experiencing social exclusion, the protagonist is assertive about her wish to stay in the capital city.

The Claim of the Non-*Tehrani* Woman to the City

As indicated previously, the narrator distinguishes herself not only by being a non-*Tehrani* resident of the capital city but also by the fact that she is a

[251] Ibid., 97.
[252] Ibid., 241.
[253] Ibid., 20.

woman, as she underlines that she is "a female *Shahrestani* student in Tehran" (my emphasis).[254] Her gender, in and of itself, brings forward new challenges for the character; wandering in Tehran as a woman and as a non-*Tehrani* is intrinsically more problematic. This issue is particularly noticeable in a passage in which the protagonist recounts the police investigation of Liyan's case once she has disappeared. In this particular scene, a few officers visit the dormitory and aggressively search the room. They repeatedly ask Solmaz if her roommate is pregnant, implying that Liyan has not disappeared and has instead escaped to avoid the consequences of a pregnancy. This recurrent question, and the officers' emphasis on it, eventually infuriates the protagonist, who is critical of the police forces' inspection.[255] In other words, Liyan's gendered body has made her disappearance less of a serious concern, as, from the officers' point of view, the capability of her body to be tempted and then impregnated, is grounds for her to become a fallen woman.

The notion of the problematic nature of the female body in urban explorations of provincial women is analyzed by Ellen Rosenman, a professor of English studies, within the framework of Victorian literature ideology. She argues that the mere presence of the female body and female sexuality were deemed problematic, and therefore, female characters had scarcely been portrayed as the subjects of their own desire. In the rare occasions in which authors created a female character curious about her body and her sexual desires, their narrative trajectories usually led them inevitably to a grim fate. This issue was underpinned by the account that female characters' consciousness about their bodies would be the element that eventually paves "the way for their fall."[256]

Accordingly, in *Natamami*'s narrative, the police officers' behavior echoes similar speculation about the problematic nature of female bodies in the sexualized environment of cities. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the main characters are not only categorized as female but also as non-*Tehranis*. In this respect, the novel also explores the generally accepted belief regarding provincial women's female sexual purity, which is assumed to be in danger of moral degradation in urban environments. This matter is explicitly reflected in Solmaz's family's behavior and the

[254] 'Abdi, *Natamami*, 7; the urban explorations of provincial women have been widely drafted, scripted, exaggerated, or even pathologized in numerous (non)fictive texts. The character of the "fallen woman" in these narratives embodies the prevalent belief at the outset of urbanization that provincial women cannot resist the city's temptations. Under these circumstances, the narrative trajectory led the ill-fated protagonist and her urban wanderings to corruption, vice, and utmost misery. In these stories, which Deborah Parsons refers to as stories based on "the fallen-girl-in-city formula," the innocent provincial woman who has thus far lived in the predictability of a small town is degraded into a morally fallen woman. For a detailed survey of these narratives, see: Parsons, Streetwalking the Metropolis; Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, "Spectacular Women: 'The Mysteries of London' and the Female Body," *Victorian Studies* 40, no. 1 (1996): 31–64.

[255] 'Abdi, *Natamami*, 18.

[256] Rosenman, "Spectacular Women," 36.

control they exert over her life. I will also address the protagonist's motivation to stay in Tehran, exploring what exactly pulls her to the capital city, wrenching her from the safety of her small town to the uncertainty of hectic and, at times, unwelcoming Tehran.

In *Natamami*, Tehran is portrayed as a city that, although inherently arduous, eventually provides an opportunity for Solmaz to lead her desired urban life. On several occasions, for instance, Solmaz expresses her exasperation at the pressure her family has put on her. For example, they demand that she limit her time spent wandering the city. The protagonist's family is disturbed by her possible male companions in Tehran and worried that she would be exploited by sexual encounters in the capital city. Because of this, whenever the protagonist visits her hometown, she has to face relentless interrogation about her relations in the city from her family: "they think Tehran is the agent of vice. Everyone who sets her foot in Tehran is destroyed."[257]

The character's annoyance at this excessive control is mentioned in another scene narrating her effort to find Liyan in the city center. As Solmaz is struggling to find a trace of her friend, she receives a phone call from her mother, who tells her that her grandfather is severely ill. Once the narrator's mother hears the background noise of the city on the other end of the line, however, the terrible news of her grandfather's illness becomes insignificant:

> مادر مشکوک می‌شود و می‌پرسد: «صدای ماشین از کجاست؟ این وقت روز وسط شهر چه کار می‌کنی؟» زبانم بی‌اجازه‌ی من می‌گوید «چشم. چشم». انگار دارد می‌بیندم. به صرافت می‌افتم و بلند بلند می‌گویم «الو، الو.» و وانمود می‌کنم صدایش نمی‌رسد و قطع می‌کنم.
>
> Mum becomes suspicious and asks: "Where is that car noise coming from? What are you doing in the middle of the city at this time of the day?" My tongue, without my permission, replies: Sure...sure... [*chashm*]. As if she sees me. I think and say loudly: hello...hello? I pretend that I can't hear her voice and hang up.[258]

Chashm is a figurative expression in Persian, indicating that the individual will do what another person has requested. In this case, the mother is unsettled, hearing the hubbub of the city and presuming its possible danger for her daughter. Solmaz, on the other hand, is annoyed by her mother's confrontation and promptly agrees to stop her wrongdoing. However, the protagonist only verbally consents to the legibility of her family's concern, as she deliberately ends the phone call and, right afterward, resumes her urban mission.

This event, therefore, is an example of the opportunities that cities can provide for women, especially provincial female urban wanderers. Regardless of interferences of families, or other similar hindrances, women can nevertheless benefit from the wide possibilities within an urban setting, since the people trying to control them have limited agency in cities. In this case, for instance, Solmaz's

[257] 'Abdi, *Natamami*, 242.

[258] Ibid., 106.

mother contacts her and is upset about her daughter's seemingly hidden affair with the capital city, but she cannot interfere with Solmaz's life since the city has already shielded her from anyone's interference. In this respect, the claim-making practice of female non-*Tehrani*s in *Natamami* is depicted as an effort to assert their presence in the city and benefit from its opportunities. Besides the two main characters, several other minor characters inspired in the same way are mentioned in the narrative. For instance, the protagonist's dormitory is filled with young *Shahrestani* women who desire to stay in Tehran: "[remaining in Tehran] is the prevalent desire in the dormitory. It is unfortunate that you would stay in Tehran for a few years and could not find a way to settle here."[259] Later, the protagonist describes one of these women, a young student from Zarrinshahr, a small town near Isfahan, as someone who "ran relentlessly towards her doctorate and has really gained a firm foothold in the capital city's buttock. She is one of those sly, scheming ones."[260] In another instance, the narrator describes her new roommate, who has replaced Liyan, as another non-*Tehrani* woman who confesses that "even the devil cannot make me return to Divandarreh [small city in Kurdistan province]."[261]

In this sense, staying in Tehran and laying claim to its possibilities is rather like a hierarchical struggle through which the frontrunners can secure their positions in the city. The capital city and its binary of *Shahrestani*/*Tehrani* inhabitants appear to be, especially for female non-*Tehrani*s, a hostile social environment. Yet, the urban opportunities of Tehran lead to paths that liberate, providing the young female characters with the prospect of discovering new modes of their female agencies. Hence, despite the underlying conflicts to which they should resolve or over which they should prevail, they are prompted to lay their claim on the city.

In the following section, I will expand on the relationship between urban claim-making and female bodies, which, as I will argue, is also explored in *Natamami* from the perspective of the citizens/authority binary. In doing so, I discuss how ʿAbdi portrays this tension as a continuous struggle in Tehran in which both sides aim to assert their preferred image of the city.

Remapping the City under Surveillance

As discussed earlier, the female urban experience exploring how women negotiate their presence in cities has become a major area of interest within various disciplines. Considering that the female body and the desire for this body were for long deemed problematic, scholars of urban sociology have attempted to

[259] Ibid., 24.
[260] Ibid., 15.
[261] Ibid., 24

address how female bodies are observed and perceived in urban environments.[262] Elizabeth Wilson, for example, suggests that urban life is based on a struggle between the feminine and the masculine. While the latter presents itself in a "triumphal scale," and involves a yearning for control by imposing a "routinised order" on inhabitants' lives, the feminine embodies an "enclosing embrace," and an "indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncentredness."[263] Wilson explains that the "triumphal scale" is signified in "towers and vistas and arid industrial regions" as well as the "bureaucratic conformity" in urban settings, yet the feminine "enclosing embrace" is the opposite of this rigid order, as it is rather a "pleasurable anarchy."[264]

It is important to note that Wilson critically questions urban development programs of European countries and the United States, since, according to her, the perspective of women and other minorities was neglected throughout the development processes in question. Although Wilson is well aware of how the labyrinthine nature of cities may restrict women's spatial mobility, she argues that neither the ineffectual urban planning nor the "routinised order" imposed by male policymakers can discourage females from their urban wanderings. Wilson concludes that cities normalize "the carnivalesque aspects of life," which in itself, opened the "way to sexual exploration and the fulfillment of fantasies."[265] In other words, the variety of experiences in an urban setting allows inhabitants to explore and discover hidden parts of the city, and in the process of doing so, explore their own identities. The city welcomes diversity and encourages the residents to wander about, observe, and make alliances with other inhabitants who share similar aspirations and desires.[266]

Correspondingly, the Tehran of *Natamami* provides its version of "carnivalesque aspects of life" for female characters. The "triumphal scale," according to Wilson's theorization, also appears in *Natamami*, albeit through a socio-politically driven control practice, namely, the existence of security cameras. In ʿAbdi's Tehran, this form of surveillance has a dominating presence, and citizens are under its unyielding observation. The main objective of this constant monitoring, as will be argued, is to control inhabitants' behavior and their bodies, especially those

[262] See, for example, Kath Browne, Jason Lim, and Gavin Brown, *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Linda Peake, *A Feminist Theory for Our Time: Rethinking Social Reproduction and the Urban*, Antipode Book Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2021); Kristen Day, "Constructing Masculinity and Women's Fear in Public Space in Irvine, California," *Gender, Place & Culture* 8, no. 2 (June 2001): 109–27.

[263] Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 7.

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid., 7 & 89.

[266] Wilson's theorization of the contradictory nature of the city accurately demonstrates how urban environments can be both confining and liberating for women. Nevertheless, her proposed male/female dichotomy of urban life follows a strict binary categorization of male and female traits, which undermines the social-constructedness of gender traits.

of the female inhabitants.[267] In this respect, the protagonist repeatedly refers to surveillance cameras throughout the narrative. For example, on one occasion, as she walks in the university courtyard with Jahangir, her partner, she expresses her yearning to touch him. She is nonetheless afraid of the consequences:

> می‌خواهم دستم را بندازم دور شانه‌اش و سرش را بگذارم روی شانه‌ام اما احساس می‌کنم جعفری یا کسی از حراست پشت سروها دارد می‌پایدمان. احساس می‌کنم وسط هر سرو یک دوربین جاسازی شده. یاد اشاره‌ی پوریا به سقف اتاق کانون می‌افتم و دوربین‌های مداربسته که بچه‌ها می‌گفتند در بیشتر چراغ‌های سقفی کار گذاشته شده.
>
> I want to put my arm around his shoulder and rest his head on my shoulder, but I feel like Ja'fari or someone else is observing us from behind the cypress trees. I feel that a camera is embedded in the middle of each cypress tree. I remember Puriya pointing to the ceiling of the student union. Many students said CCTV cameras were installed in most of the ceiling lights.[268]

Most notably, the collective anxiety of being under strict surveillance is not an illusory concern but is relatively well-justified: at one point, the protagonist recounts the process in which university authorities installed several cameras throughout the campus. Although dozens of students protested and vandalized the surveillance apparatuses, the protests were suppressed eventually, and the cameras were reinstalled.

Later in the narrative, the protagonist reveals that this issue, the persistent feeling of being under control, makes her anxious to such an extent that it becomes an existential crisis. Since, in her contemplations, the long-term effects of being the object of such a control practice can lead to losing the sense of self:

> واقعیت یا توهم هر لحظه دیده شدن، می‌تواند روی هر احساسی چنبره بزند. می‌تواند دانه‌ی یک دیو را توی آدم بکارد و دیو بزرگ شود؛ درست اندازه‌ی خودت.
>
> The reality or the illusion of being observed at any moment can seize any other feeling, it can sow a seed of demonry in you, and the demon will grow and become exactly your own size.[269]

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[267] Generally, urban video surveillance is a controversial issue. Although governments have legitimized CCTVs (closed-circuit television) to prevent urban crimes or investigate perpetrated crimes, some research studies prove the ineffectiveness of this control practice, arguing that this form of surveillance may lead to the social exclusion of marginalized groups of societies. For further reading on the dynamics of urban surveillance and how these control practices propagate social inequality by mainly targeting urban outsiders, see: Roy Coleman, "Surveillance in the City: Primary Definition and Urban Spatial Order"; Katherine S. Williams and Craig Johnstone, "The Politics of the Selective Gaze: Closed Circuit Television and the Policing of Public Space."

[268] 'Abdi, 84 & 85.

[269] Ibid., 85.

In the above quote, one of the ravages of being under surveillance is that the individual would be perpetually concerned with the possibility of being interrogated. Another contingency of this quasi-panoptic control is engendering self-surveillance habits. For example, Solmaz indicates that female students have become accustomed to modifying their appearances according to the strict Islamic dress code of the university, even though they are not certain if they are being observed:

دخترها وقتی نزدیک دوربین می‌رسیدند انگار شخص حراست آن پشت نشسته باشد، ناخودآگاه دست می‌بردند و مقنعه را می‌کشیدند جلوتر یا دست‌های لاک زده را فرو می‌بردند توی جیب.

When the girls approached the camera, they unconsciously re-adjusted their *maqna'eh* or hid their painted fingernails in their pockets, as if the real *herasat* person (inspector) was sitting behind the camera.[270]

There is, of course, a political dimension to the prevalent presence of the security cameras in the novel. The author draws attention to the distinctive nuances of this form of spatial control practice in Iran by denoting how this process works, and what are the consequences of not conforming to mandated regulations. This is most effectively demonstrated in a passage in which Liyan is summoned to be interrogated about a problematic article she has published in a journal. In the Dean's office, she makes the dreadful discovery that the division employees observe the entire university area through numerous monitors. The cameras are installed in every corner of the campus and Liyan is startled to discover the excess of control:

سه روز بعد وقتی وارد اتاق همتی، رییس امور دانشجویی شد، تازه فهمید دوربین‌هایی که کار گذاشته شده‌اند در همه جای دانشگاه، در این اتاق چه‌قدر خوب همه جا را پوشش می‌دهند. همه انگار در صحرای محشر باشند، تمام اعمال‌شان ریز به ریز رویت می‌شد. حیاط و پنتاگون، محل تصمیم‌گیری‌های دانشجویی، کاملا در دیدرس بود. حالا فهمید چرا درخت بید صدساله را در حیاط قطع کردند. می‌گفتند زیر درخت بید شده محل فسق و فجور[...]یکی از مانیتورها صف طولانی غذا را در سلف نشان می‌داد. همه به سربه‌راه‌ترین شکل ممکن در صف بودند. انگار برای این کار از کودکی تمرین داده شده باشند.

Three days later, when she entered Hemmati's room, the Student Affairs Dean, she realized that the cameras that had been installed everywhere covered the entirety of campus. It was as if everyone was in the Sahra-ye mahshar; all of their behavior was being observed in detail. The courtyard and the Pentagon, the site of students' decision-making, were fully visible. Now she understood why they cut down the hundred-year-old willow tree in the yard. They said that under the willow tree had become a place for vice and debauchery [...] One of the monitors showed the long queue for food in the dining hall. Everyone was in

[270] Ibid., 148.

> the standing queue in the most obedient way possible. It was as if they had been trained to do this since childhood.[271]

In this passage, the narrative emphasizes, yet again, the practice of self-surveillance as a plausible outcome of being under the observing gaze of authorities, as the queue of the students represents a mass of docile bodies who are obedient, harmless, and predictable.

Another significant aspect emphasized in the above excerpt is the notion of urban vice. The author explains urban vice as an ambiguous concept characterized by a lack of consensus between the two sides (students and university authorities) about what is deemed a vice. From the officials' standpoint, any form of intimacy is prohibited and considered immoral, the gravity of which necessitates taking preventive actions, such as felling a long-lived tree. In other words, university authorities, backed by the national political regime, consider any public display of affection as wicked behavior, damaging the moralized image of an Islamic university and, more generally, an Islamic city. As such, any behavior that undermines the city's desired, purified image is considered an example of urban vice.

Accordingly, in the *Natamami* of ʿAbdi, the cameras turn the observation tactics of the dominant group (here, the university authorities) into an all-encompassing gaze, enabling them to impose their desired public behavior on students. In doing so, the individuals not submitting to this imposed culture are reproached and even punished. Not surprisingly, the broad spectrum of what is defined by the authorities as an urban vice, gradually excludes numerous citizens/students who merely wish to lead their everyday life in the city.

It is important to note that the urban cultural practices of the inhabitants include a political dimension. As Sharon Zukin, an American professor in sociology, argues, the historical relationship between authority and urban space has demonstrated that "the power to impose a coherent vision of a space enables a group to claim that space," which, in turn, leads to reducing the inherent diversity of modern urban spaces, turning them into a coherent space, the control over which would be less challenging.[272]

The same struggle is also presented in *Natamami*: the university authorities, with their predilection for a culturally purified Islamic city, exert excessive control over public spaces. As such, their surveillance map is marked by locations that, due to their spatial functionality, could give rise to urban vice (as university authorities define it) or that could support the inhabitants' mobilizing power to stage their protests and demonstrations. These particular spaces, as such, have to

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[271] Ibid., 170-171; according to Islamic eschatology, the Land of Gathering, or *sahra-ye mahshar* in Persian and *ard-i mahshar* in Arabic, is the place in which all human beings are gathered after death. On the *Day of Judgement* or *Qiyamat*, this is the location where they will be questioned about their deeds on earth. See: Smith and Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, 75; see also: Louis Gardet, "Ḳiyāma," in Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, ed. P. J Bearman et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012).

[272] ʿAbdi, 279.

be monitored or even entirely restructured to provide the ruling power with the desired large-scale control. Conversely, the map generated by students is dotted with place-based memories, urban discoveries, and safe places where they can be shielded from the controlling gaze. For instance, the authorities consider the willow tree on the campus as an inconvenient object, assuming that it provides students with a hidden spot to engage in the urban vice, becoming deviant citizens. This perception stands in complete contrast to Liyan's descriptions of the willow tree, as she emphasizes the plant's endurance and charm, foregrounding that the place in her mind's map of the city is characterized by its beauty.

Given these two oppositional attitudes, ʿAbdi has delineated a textual Tehran, which is characterized by what I suggest be called a collision of maps. On the one hand, the surveillance network aims to enforce the state-endorsed urban regulations and practices, and on the other hand, city inhabitants try to negotiate with and struggle against these imposed principles. It is crucial, however, to highlight that not all prominent spots on the map generated by young people are based on aesthetical contemplations, as was the case with the willow tree. In one instance, for example, the protagonist goes to the southern part of Tehran. She visits Eʿdam Square, whose name has officially changed to Molavi Square in recent years. While approaching the square, she ponders the history of the place, since it has been formerly used for executing prisoners. Although a new name is selected for the place in a possible attempt to erase its tragic history, Solmaz states that citizens of Tehran still refer to the place by its former name: "it seems as if that all those who were hanged here are still floundering and will not let the new name sink in."[273]

Likewise, the two versions of the maps discussed above compete to mark the city with their symbols and, at times, to re-mark the places already claimed by the other side. Both groups, the students and the university authorities, ultimately aim at imposing their desired public image of the city; while one side tries to regulate and control everyday urban life, the other is mainly characterized by resisting to be emancipated from this control. As the narrative progresses, revealing the terrors and difficulties engendered by the collision of maps, the author of the novel eventually takes sides with the protagonists and other students, offering an optimistic glimpse of how the youngsters would overcome the entangled surveillance network. For example, although Solmaz is hesitant to reach out and touch her partner in public, in the excerpt mentioned earlier, she resolves to do so, regardless of being recorded by the cameras or the possible punitive actions that may be taken against them. In this sense, another place is pinned onto their personal map of the city by a tender private memory, while on the other side, the crime-mapping practice is presumably in progress to label the place as another location which could potentially be problematic.

One of the most notable issues in this regard, the topographical conflict over the desired image of the city, occurs not for Liyan or Solmaz but for Tanasgol,

[273] Ibid., 192.

a young gypsy woman. This event brings explicitly into sharper focus the notion of female sexuality and its relation to female autonomy in the context of Iranian urban space. In the next section, I will briefly introduce the character and then analyze the scene in question.

The Right to Express Female Desire in Tehran

Tanasgol is introduced in the novel as a thirteen-year-old girl from the gypsy community of Tehran. She has recently decided to take responsibility for Hami, who is only six months old. Hami's biological mother is Anna, Tanasgol's cousin. Living with her cousin's family, Tanasgol has endured constant sexual violence from Anna's husband, ʿAjif. In the chapters in which the omniscient narrator recounts Liyan's journey, the author focuses specifically on Tanasgol so that the reader can follow the character's urban activities through her viewpoint. With this character, ʿAbdi examines the relationship between sexuality, gender, and urban space. Considering the heavy censorship of the publishing industry in Iran, this section of the novel, which will be discussed in length, is somewhat unprecedented in post-revolutionary Iranian literature, as it explicitly addresses female sexuality.[274] In one instance, ʿAbdi recounts the urban wandering of Tanasgol on an early autumn afternoon. On this particular day, Tanasgol, herself merely a teenager, is not able to soothe Hami, who is incessantly crying. The infant is hungry, and Tanasgol is desperate: [275]

> It was as if walking uphill multiplied the weight of the bony child. She could not pass the police station, so the uphill slope was becoming more extreme. The 6-month-old baby, who was tied to her back with a piece of cloth, was writhing in hunger. She did not have a piece of bread in her pocket to give the baby. She turned into one of the alleys. Exhausted, she sat on the front steps of a house. The alley was deserted and full of yellow leaves. She

[274] Tanasgol's personal feelings and conundrums are explored in the novel through an in-depth character arc. As it will be established later, one of the most important parts of the novel concerns Tanasgol and her sexual exploration. Although ʿAbdi's novel presents invaluable material to investigate the dynamics of the women-city relationship, it must be noted that the narrative falls short of treating the rest of the gypsy characters with similar depth and intricacy. A significant part of the novel is allocated to the *Ghorbati* community and ʿAbdi claims that she has amply researched this community to become acquainted with their lifestyle, dialects, and social associations. The novel, however, perpetuates the problematic stereotypical image of the gypsy community, as most of the Gypsy characters in are portrayed as individuals with unreasonable and unexplainable anger, prone to excessive aggression and juvenile delinquency. This stereotypical perception of the gypsy communities is underpinned as the author presents them as "others" who cannot be accepted in society, and neither can they be considered one of "us." For a detailed critical analysis of the stereotypical representation of the gypsy community in ʿAbdi's novel, see: Delaram ʿAli and Mitra Afsari, "Digari sazi be madade qesse-pardazi,"; for reading more into the problematic nature of such representations of Gypsy community, especially female characters, see: Jodie Matthews, *The Gypsy Woman: Representations in Literature and Visual Culture*, 6 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

[275] Given the significance of this section, the entire passage has been translated.

> removed Hami from her back and took him in her arms. Through her thin clothes, the baby rubbed his mouth against the girl's breasts, just like an animal instinctively figuring out where to look. It had been a year since Tanasgol's breasts had swelled. The warmth of the baby's mouth imposed a sharp, violent, and painful puberty on her small 13-year-old breasts. She looked around. She really wanted to know how the baby would react to her small breasts. She lifted the hem of her shirt, and the baby placed half of her small breast into his greedy, hot mouth. He was suckling, like a chick ruthlessly pulling life out of its mother's throat. The baby's hot, feverish mouth warmed her. Suddenly, she was scared. She wanted to pull her breast out of his mouth, but the baby held her breast tightly with his right hand. She thought Hami must be pulling something out of her body and he did not let go. He became greedy, and something right from her nipple spread into her entire body, a pain that was not pain. At first, it was burning, but now she did not want the baby to let go of her breast. The baby's wet eyes were almost partially closed, and Tanasgol felt she also wanted to close her eyes. Something had gathered in her eyes and between her legs. She untied her scarf and pulled the corners over her breast and Hami's face. The baby suckled so much that his chin trembled, and his suckling became weak. Tanasgol moved the baby's leg. The baby's chin shook again, gripped her breast, and resumed suckling. She glanced at both ends of the alley and shook the baby again. Now, all that painful feeling was gathered between her legs, like a giant boiled potato that was so hot. The baby's eyelids were closed. The top of his lips was full of tiny drops of sweat. Tensgel shook his leg, but the baby no longer had the energy to suckle. Tensgel shook harder, but it was as if the baby was dead. Tanasgol's breast was separated from the baby's mouth. The baby's lips were bloody. Her nipple was torn, and small drops of blood dripped from her wounded nipple. The boiled potato, which was as hot as the NGO's dinner every Thursday evening, was gradually growing smaller and colder between her legs. Hot liquid spilled out and dampened the entire area between her legs. She lifted the baby a little and looked. The crotch of her red pants was redder with a large stain.[276]

Although ambiguous, the syntax of this passage is extensively detailed, as it ultimately evokes a quintessentially erotic scene in a deserted *Tehrani*an alley.[277] Tanasgol's initial attempt to soothe the baby, a clumsy imitation of breastfeeding, leads to a journey within her own body and, eventually, a journey to discovering self-pleasure.

It is important to emphasize, once more, that Tanasgol's backstory is paved with adversity: she is an orphan and has frequently been abused by various men in her community. Her cousin's husband and two other gypsy men are obsessed with her and harass her on several occasions throughout the novel. Even Hami, an infant in the above passage, eventually becomes a drug addict, and his tragic destiny agonizes Tanasgol all the more. As such, a significant aspect regarding Tanasgol's characterization is that her intersecting identity as female, a minor, and a member of the gypsy community subjects her to excessive discriminatory

[276] 'Abdi, 124–25.

[277] It is possible that the author uses this equivocal tone in order to avoid the imminent censorial revisions regulated by *Vezarat-e farhang va ershad-e eslami* (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance).

behaviors.[278] In other words, her marginality positions her as more vulnerable and with fewer advantages than the rest of the novel's characters.

Given the constant episodes of abuse by ʿAjif, there is no real sense of a home for Tanasgol, as she cannot truly feel at ease even within the private sphere of the home.[279] Under these circumstances, she retreats to the city to have a moment for herself. How does this happen, and why does she go to the city? Or, to pose the question more accurately, why in this city, which, as was established earlier, is a city of collision of maps, a city of constant surveillance? In what way does such a city open up the possibility for Tanasgol's first sexual exploration? The answer, here again, leads us to a closer examination of the body/space relationship and the claim-making practices of bodies in urban space.

In her influential essay, Body-Cities, Elizabeth Grosz argues that a mutual relationship exists between bodies and the urban environment. She states, "the city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, 'citified,' urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body."[280] Grosz then states the ways in which cities can culturally reinvent the identity of the "citified" body: "the city is also [...] the site for the body's cultural saturation, its takeover, and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts– the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed."[281] Moreover, the bodies are able to, in a reciprocal manner, reconfigure the urban landscape. Because of this, the body and its "habits, alignments, pleasures, norms, and ideals are the ostensible object of governmental regulation, and the city is a key tool."[282]

As outlined above, Tehran's urban policy is based on a set of hegemonic Islamic norms that present a morally purified image of the space, a desexualized city. To this end, the cityscape is regulated by an intensive surveillance network, targeting possible public offenders. In this respect, the dominating control practice is imposed on the citified bodies of Tehran to turn them into bodies that comply with the desired norms established by the authorities. The compulsory dress code for women, for example, can be considered a policy to control female bodies and create a homogeneously Islamic citizenry. According to this rationale, only

[278] See the seminal essay of Crenshaw on the theory of *Intersectionality,* Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminist Legal Theories*, ed. Karen J Maschke, 2015, 139–67.

[279] For a detailed analysis of how the legal reluctance to interfere with the private sphere can strengthen male dominance and lead to domestic violence, see: Nancy Duncan, "Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces," in *BodySpace: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 127–46.

[280] Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies-Cities," in *Sexuality & Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina and Jennifer Bloomer, Princeton Papers on Architecture 1 (New York, N.Y: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 242.

[281] Ibid., 249.

[282] Ibid.

by wearing this approved clothing would female inhabitants be able to fulfill the requirements of being members of a moralized Islamic city.

In the above-mentioned passage, Tanasgol is fearful that she might be under control; thus, she frequently examines her surroundings. Earlier in the passage, it is also revealed that she had to change her itinerary in order to escape the notice of the police on the account that her presence as a gypsy woman in the city could raise suspicion. Interestingly, Tanasgol removes her scarf at a certain point and covers her breast to be more at ease in the discovery of her body's pleasure. In this respect, although the scarf is originally a tool imposed on her body, its function is altered here to serve her current purpose instead, shielding her from the gaze of possible intruders, including the authorities. Hence, Tanasgol, despite all the factors rendering her an ostensibly powerless and marginalized figure in Tehran, lays her own claim on the city by not only evading socio-spatial control but by mapping the city through the exploration of her female desire. Although other characters of the novel experience moments of intimacy by moving stealthily around the streets of Tehran, concealing themselves from the cameras and the dominating gaze, it is Tanasgol who, by exploring her desire, puts the most exceptional mark on the textual map of Tehran in *Natamami*.

In this respect, Tehran's public spaces open up possibilities for Tanasgol's abused body to experience pleasure and sexual satisfaction. As such, this rather brief yet important event in the narrative suggests that the government's efforts to construct a desexualized Tehran are futile. The city inhabitants constantly challenge disciplinary power through their spatial strategies. Female urbanites, in particular, withstand the restrictive urban rules through their everyday claim-making practices. Not all instances of the practices are as radical as Tanasgol's, yet they challenge the organization of public space by asserting their individual and collective rights to the city.

In the concluding section, I offer a summary of the discussions presented in this chapter, and I consider the theme of urban claim-making as a nexus, connecting the frustrated characters of *Negaran nabash* to those of *Natamami*.

Final Discussion

The intricacy of urban claim-making processes in the context of Iranian society is one of the primary subjects of both novels. The city is a contested space in which various groups inscribe their own meaning and values onto the urban façade. The urbanites that these novels represent and their demands, as were established in this chapter, however, are relatively different.

Negaran nabash is an outsider-led urban utopia in which the city's vast possibilities are depicted and centered around the inherently democratic albeit farfetched idea of the Right to the City. On the other hand, *Natamami* delves into, firstly, the social conflicts of *Shahrestani/Tehrani* over the city and then explores the political nature of site-specific controlling practices through which the bodies and behavior of inhabitants, especially females, are under surveillance.

If the *flâneurial* narrative of the protagonist in *Negaran nabash* revealed how the inhabitants availed themselves of urban anarchy to express their frustration, the narrative of the minor characters discloses the longevity and the intensity of their alienation from their city. Mohebbʿali's novel, in this respect, is filled with socially marginalized characters who do not play a significant part in advancing the story, yet the accumulation of these characters' stories ultimately becomes its own tale of urban exclusion. The novel focuses on the younger generation of the protagonist's brother. This community of youngsters believes that the incompetent people who played a role in creating the present-day urban divide in Tehran have deserted it; they have left the city in fear. Therefore, it is the perfect opportunity for the youth to reclaim their city. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the marginality of the young characters is emphasized through their physical characteristics, which are not in line with traditional social norms. That the narrative presents little information about their backgrounds reinforces the significance of their collective identity as marginalized individuals, as outsiders of society. What connects them is, mainly and most importantly, the fact that their urban life is marked by exclusion.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Tehran of *Negaran nabash*, chaotic as it is, is a possible city. This city is an alternative urban scene in which the marginalized inhabitants have the opportunity to de-alienate the city and give rise to the discourse of urban inclusion. Mohebbʿali's narrative, in this sense, unveils the dynamics of urban inequality and the consequences thereof. Although, the inhabitants' cries and demands in the Lefebvrian sense, are subdued and their hopes crushed by the end of the story, the narrative grants the characters, especially the young protestors, the chance to experience a city of their own, even just for the course of a day.

Zahra ʿAbdi's novel, likewise, explores urban vice, social tension, and female transgression against the backdrop of a hectic Tehran, which reveals its surprising nature in her story. The city's unpredictability surfaces at times in unknown alleys, dark corners, and dangerous passageways, leading characters to trouble. At other times, the cityscape shocks the characters as it provides them with fortuitous adventures, intimate encounters, and liberating experiences. Tellingly, all these events occur in an urban environment whose government extensively controls every aspect of a citizen's life. Yet, public space surveillance is constantly challenged by the inhabitants. Setting her story in such a contested urban environment, ʿAbdi offers a multi-layered map of Tehran that is developed through the characters' struggles for the realization of their urban rights.

The novel also deals with the idea of reallocation of space and the associated predicaments for the newcomers to the city, in particular, for women. In this chapter, I approached the protagonist and her roommate as instances of the literary figure of provincial female urban wanderers, since both characters relocate to Tehran to emancipate themselves from the traditional and gender-biased customs of their hometown. Accordingly, the dichotomy of *Shahrestani/Tehrani* is one of

the leitmotifs of the story. Although the main characters have mixed feelings about Tehran, they are determined to remain in the city, exercise their agency as females, and take advantage of the opportunities that the urban setting affords them.

The political opposition between inhabitants and the authority in *Natamami*, furthermore, is explored through video surveillance control practices. To this end, city authorities retain the power and use it to insist on specific cultural norms from the citizens of Tehran. Consequently, the state's broadly generalized conception of immoral urban activity gives way to a seemingly irreconcilable tension between the two sides, since, for example, the protagonist and other young characters reject being reduced to bodies under surveillance. Yet, this surveillance practice consistently observes them and records any of their possible misconduct.

Nevertheless, as in Mohebbʿali's novel, the young generation devises spatial tactics to resist and challenge the surveillance apparatus. One gypsy girl named Tanasgol, in particular, plays a significant role in this regard. Although she is entangled in a web of economic hardship and domestic violence, her urban experiences are unlike the rest of the novel's characters. Through Tanasgol's urban adventures, ʿAbdi explores the pitfalls and possibilities of an urban setting like Tehran. The Tehran that Tanasgol lives in is a violent yet essentially erotic city, and we see one of the rare instances of narrating the interrelatedness between urban space and female sexuality in post-revolutionary Iranian literature. As such, in the extended passage in which Tanasgol probes her sexual desire in the city's public realm, the character remaps the city's extremely monitored environment with her female longing.

Although Zahra ʿAbdi does not write in detail about every single aspect of the characters' lives, which is a literary strategy also communicated through the title of her novel, she captures the struggles of the urbanites of Tehran in her novel. If the Tehran of *Negaran nabash* was a possible city, the city of *Natamami* is a multi-layered contested space, a diverse city in which various urban communities seek to assert their position in the city. In addition to this social conflict, there is an underlying political contestation in which the authority's vision of its desired urban culture is forced upon inhabitants in order to maintain a culturally purified image of the city. In the collision of maps formulated by ʿAbdi, the citified bodies of Tehran eventually prevail, marking the map of the city with their pain, struggles, pleasure, and orgastic experiences.

Chapter V: Conflicting City: Identity Formation and Urban Narrative Space

To be is to be in place; conversely,
to be without place is not to be.[283]

Identity can be defined in many different ways, and there are numerous scholarly interpretations of identity that are explored across a range of disciplines. In its psychological sense, identity can be broadly defined as a person's sense of self which "provides the ability to experience one's self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly."[284] The process of identity formation, in other words, is based on an individual's perception of who she/he is, and what characteristics, affiliations, and values distinguish one person from other people.

Over the past years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the intersection of identity and space.[285] In this respect, different aspects of one's surroundings are key factors in defining an individual's concept of self, since one's surroundings can fundamentally affect how a person constructs spatial associations and how one connects to the physical surroundings. If, for example, an individual is emotionally attached to a place, the person gradually comes to define her/himself based on this spatial association. On the contrary, when individuals cannot develop a sense of belonging to the place they occupy, it may affect their ability to maintain a cohesive selfhood.

This aspect of identity formation is particularly important for my research since the public spaces within cities are a significant part of inhabitants' everyday lives. They spend the majority of their time in the city, driving through or walking in specific streets on a regular basis, and as such, these repetitive exposures to the cityscape gradually become integral to how they define themselves. In other words, the "individual's conception of the city" and his urban experience becomes associated with "his definition of 'who I am.'"[286]

Accordingly, the main objective of this chapter, which is the last analytical section of this book, is to examine the process of the characters' identity formation in relation to the spaces that surround them, particularly in the urban setting. The theme of identity construction was briefly touched upon in previous chapters—for example, in discussions concerning the embodiment of *Negaran*

[283] The statement is attributed to ancient Greek philosopher Archytas, quoted in Edward S Casey, "Smooth Spaces and Rough-Edged Places: The Hidden History of Place," *Review of Metaphysics* 51, no. 2 (1997), 274.

[284] Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1993), 37.

[285] For a review of existing literature about the process of identity formation, and the relationship between Identity and space, see the second chapter, pp 40–44.

[286] Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff, "Place-Identity: Physical World Socialization of the Self," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3, no. 1 (1983), 78.

nabash's protagonist as a *flâneuse* and how such an exercise affects her behavioral patterns—yet in this chapter, I mainly focus on two novels in which the concept of identity is one of the central themes, and a dynamic feature in the advancement of the plot.

The first novel I will discuss is *Az sheytan amukht va suzand* (From the Devil, Learned and Burned), written by Farkhondeh Aqa'i. The issue of the spatial dimension of identity construction is especially addressed in the novel, as the main character is a woman who, at the outset of the narrative, becomes homeless. As such, she spends the majority of her time in the streets, while she rejects her identity to be subsumed into a displaced and homeless woman. Due to her homelessness, the narrator maintains a paradoxical relationship with Tehran throughout the narrative, and as such, space, above all of the other narrative elements, plays a vital role in Aqa'i's novel. Perhaps more than in any other novel under analysis in this study, space has direct and substantial effects on the protagonist's course of life.

One of the novel's important features is that it is entirely written in a fictional diary format, and thus, the reader follows the story through the protagonist's own narration. Since this narratological strategy is inextricably intertwined with the author's reflection on her protagonist's identity struggles, I will extensively discuss, in this chapter, the characteristics of fictional diaries and their literary implications.

Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am, written by Sara Salar, is the second novel that will be examined here. In the third chapter, I explored Salar's narrative regarding the novel's articulation of a *Tehrani*an *flâneuse*. In the following discussion, I once again bring to attention some aspects of the character's *flâneurial* observations, as they are significant to how the protagonist relates and responds to her spatial surroundings. I have thoroughly introduced the novel, the significant narratological features, and the thematic content in the third chapter, the latter of which is mainly concerned with the protagonist's identity struggles.[287] Although this aspect of the narrative considerably affects the protagonist's presence, always in motion, in the city as a *flâneuse*, I decided to only briefly discuss this in the third chapter and develop the major part of the discussion in this section, which keeps a sustained focus on the role that space takes in the process of the character's identity formation.[288]

The first section of this chapter presents a plot summary of *Az sheytan* and subsequently, the following part concentrates on the diary format of Aqa'i's novel, discussing how it fits neatly into the main objective of the narrative, which is exploring the character's identity struggle in relation to the surrounding urban space. The following section provides a concise analysis of different layers of the

[287] See the third chapter for a brief introduction to the novel and its plot summary: pp 59–62.

[288] For a short biography of the authors and the reception of the novels, see the first chapter: pp 21–27.

narrative space as they appear in the novel. Finally, in the last section, in combining the two themes of the narrative space and identity formation, I will discuss how the protagonist's identity formation is influenced by different elements in the physical environment, and how her spatial imagery is articulated in the narrative.

In the next section about Sara Salar's novel, the relationship between space and identity will be further explored. As the protagonist's complicated relationship with her body is introduced in the narrative as a central issue, I will also examine the character's embodied identity, and explore to what senses it is related to her surroundings. This overview, accordingly, lays the groundwork for discussing the vital role of urban public space in (trans)forming the protagonist's sense of identity. Finally, consistent with the structure of the previous chapters, the concluding section offers a summary of the discussions, examining the similarities and differences between the two narratives' approaches to the identity-generating aspect of urban public space.

Desiring Somewhere: Urban Space and Identity in *Az sheytan*

Plot Summary

The novel *Az sheytan* tells the story of an Iranian-Armenian Christian woman named Volga who has become homeless after her Muslim husband has thrown her out of the marital home. Deprived of visiting her son, she sleeps in a public library as she struggles to cope with the consequences of her sudden homelessness. In the meantime, the protagonist seeks to reorganize her financial circumstances by taking multiple part-time jobs. She also receives a small amount of monthly allowance from her aunt Puran. As this allowance and the income barely covers her daily expenses, she borrows money from acquaintances and frequently visits a mosque to ask for loans. Her diary lists all her financial business carefully, and she keeps track of the cost of every meal she eats, each book she buys, all the money she borrows, and the loans she eventually returns. Based on Volga's self-reflective diary entries, one can assume that she is an educated woman, fluent in three languages. Moreover, she constantly mentions that she has studied at a prominent college and has lived in the United Kingdom and Cyprus for a while.

For the first few weeks of her homelessness, the protagonist sleeps at a public library. Yet, due to some issues with the library's new manager, Volga is expelled from the public library and loses her temporary shelter. The course of the narrative from this point onwards describes a gloomier turn of events, as the protagonist has no choice but to sleep on the streets or at the houses of men with whom she has just met. Because of this, her condition severely deteriorates to the extent that, on several occasions, she is sexually and emotionally abused. In one instance, for example, she seeks safety in the storeroom of a church. But the sacred space does not provide her any protection because she is raped by a janitor

on her first night there. Volga's struggle to find support after this event brings into relief the unequal gender relations in the context of Iranian urban policy. This matter will be discussed thoroughly in the following section.

By the end of the narrative, the protagonist finally manages to rent a small apartment. However, her problematic relationship with her surroundings is not yet over; Volga expresses in her diary that the ill-mannered landlady, who suspects a possible affair between the narrator and her husband, discourages her from considering her newly found apartment a place where she will be able to live long-term.

Main Features

The narrative of *Az sheytan*, as mentioned in the introductory section, is written in diary format, and the chronological entries of the novel cover nearly two and a half years of the protagonist's life. Throughout these 625 days, Volga narrates the obstacles she encounters as she tries to secure a decent life in the city.

The novel's title is part of an elegy written and sung by Baqer Oghli, an Armenian ashik (traveling bard). The elegy, which is also quoted on the back cover of the book, is about the repression of the Armenian community during the reign of Nader Shah in the eighteenth century. Baqer Oghli, in his elegy, expresses his discontent regarding the Armenians' difficulties, indicating that Nader Shah's cruelty towards Armenians, especially in the last years of his reign, led to their suffering: "He [Nader Shah] learned from the devil and burned, then he became mad and couldn't bear it, he burned eight kadkhodas' (village chiefs) heads at once, so we [Armenians] were at the end of our tether."[289]

Aqa'i stated in an interview that the first draft of her novel was written in third-person narration.[290] In revising the draft, however, she decided to alter it to the fictive diary format instead, reasoning that this style had not yet been widely used in Persian literature.[291] Although Aqa'i is not entirely accurate in her assumption about the scarcity of different diary and epistolary forms in Persian fiction, using the diary-style narrative fits perfectly with her story's objective. As argued by the literary scholar Bernard Duyfhuizen, diary fictions communicate a

[289] Harootun Der Hovhanian, *Tarikh-e Julfa-ye Isfahan,* trans. Leon Minassian and M.A. Mussavi Fereydani (Isfahan: Zendeh rud, 2000), 195.

[290] Farkhondeh Aqa'i, "Man va shoma ham Volga hastim", interview by Mojtaba Purmohsen, Radio Zamaneh (website), May 4, 2007.

[291] Epistolary writing, as a literary genre, has not been unpopular among Iranian authors. *Parvaneh*, written by Mohammad Hejazi in 1953, is an early example of this genre. Mahmud E'temadzadeh (mostly known as M. Beh Azin) is another writer who wrote a novel employing this format. His novel *Az an su-ye divar* is a romantic story, and the narrative consists of the letter correspondence between two lovers. The novel *Digar esmat ra 'avaz nakon* written by Majid Qeysari is a recent example, as the narrative is in the form of letters exchanged between two characters (two soldiers from Iran and Iraq) during the war.

sense of "genuineness, immediacy, and expressiveness" to the reader.[292] Likewise, the fictive diary format in *Az sheytan* conveys the dreadful condition of the protagonist by giving the reader access to her own thoughts. Furthermore, the seemingly short temporal gap between the experienced and narrated events gives the reader a sense of immediacy, an illusion of reading her documented reality. Accordingly, the narrative paces along this blurry line between fictionality and reality, evoking profound feelings in the reader.[293]

The novel starts with an entry dated Wednesday, 12th of August 1998, when Volga abruptly announces: "This is my first night sleeping in the reading room of the 24-hour library of Shafaq Cultural house (*Farhangsara*)".[294] The novel's implied author, Volga, does not obligate herself to explain what has happened to her and why she is sleeping in the library. In other words, from the very early point of the narrative, it becomes clear that the protagonist/narrator does not intend to present a well-developed account of her life. Similarly, the text is occasionally fragmented, which reflects her mental state in response to her stressful experience of homelessness.

When considering the novel's diary format, it is important to highlight that there is no reference to any particular implied reader in the narrative. Only in one instance, when Volga loses her diary, does a (pseudo-)implied reader emerge in the narrative. A library staff member, Mr. Hedayati, finds the notebook and returns it, but Volga is not pleased with this incident, especially once she discovers the possibility of her diary having been read: "I understood from his words that he has read my notes. I became so angry. I don't like nosy people. Particularly, I don't like someone reading my private notes."[295] This hostile reaction to an unwanted reader reinforces the idea that the protagonist writes mostly for herself. Throughout this process, the diarist takes note of mundane activities—for example, she constantly uses her notebook as a memorandum, reminding herself to pay a debt she owes or to visit doctors for various physical problems. The narrator also extensively writes about her memories, reminding herself of the life she led prior to her unanticipated displacement.

It is worth noting that the narrative addresses a narratee on very few occasions. In these instances, the sentences are formulated using the second-person singular form, most of which are merely associated with praying and acts of supplication: "Jesus! With Your sacred name, the shelter of my soul, I am free of suffering. When I have Your support, I know You will help me safely arrive at the shore."[296] These intimate lines of prayer, consecutively, leave readers with the

[292] Bernard Duyfhuizen, "Diary Narratives in Fact and Fiction," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 19, no. 2 (1986):177.

[293] Peter Morton, "Narrative Strategies in the Fictive Diary:" (Life Writing Symposium, Flinders: Flinders UP, 2006): 3.

[294] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 5.

[295] Ibid., 76.

[296] Ibid., 239.

feeling of reading a private book, which in itself, gives the narrative text a sense of genuineness and intimacy.

As stated earlier, the fragmented language of the diary, as well as Volga's hints about having a history of mental illness, indicate the possibility of the reported events being exaggerated or even distorted. In other words, as the story is solely focalized through the homodiegetic narrator's writing, the reader cannot verify any of the diarist's claims with accounts of other characters. Nevertheless, this is not a concern for the reader of fictive diaries. This matter is discussed in length by Porter Abbott, Professor Emeritus of English studies, in his analysis of epistolary and diary fiction, suggesting that in these types of literary texts, the fictional writer (implied author) is isolated from other characters.[297] By "cloistering" the narrator, the character becomes "immune from the wisdom of others."[298] Thus, as Abbot concludes, the reader will not be concerned about the other characters' validation of the narrator's account or the veracity of the narrated events, and instead, the narrative engages the reader with the process of the protagonist's "self-conception." Due to this receptive dynamic of diary fiction, these types of narratives are able to "intensify our concentration on the central figure's private drama of self-awareness."[299]

Accordingly, Farkhondeh Aqa'i's use of the diary format has also directed the main focus of the narrative trajectory to Volga's identity formation and to a detailed exploration of how her displacement, and her gradual social decline, challenge the character's sense of self. The narrative of *Az sheytan* is, thus, centered around the spatial aspect of identity formation of the diarist, which renders the accounts of other characters about the protagonist insignificant. Therefore, Volga's self-conception and spatial anxieties are the foci of the narrative and the story's main theme.

Layers of Narrative Space in *Az sheytan*

As indicated earlier, this chapter will focus on the connections between narrative space and the character's process of identity formation. Before proceeding with this discussion, however, it is important to classify, based on the theoretical framework presented by Marie-Laure Ryan, the various narrative spaces through and across which the protagonist negotiates her identity, as this categorization will facilitate the analysis concerning the question of identity and relationships to space in the novel.[300] I will also return to this categorization, once again, when I explore Sara Salar's protagonist's sense of place.

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[297] H. Porter Abbott, "Letters to the Self: The Cloistered Writer in Nonretrospective Fiction," *PMLA* 95, no. 1 (January 1980), 23.

[298] Ibid.

[299] Ibid.

[300] I have introduced Ryan's categorization in the second chapter, see: pp 43–44.

Marie-Laure Ryan explores five different categories of narrative space often included in fictional texts.[301] The first category, as thoroughly explained in the second chapter, is called spatial frames, and refers to the specific locations that characters occupy or where action takes place.[302] In Aqa'i's novel, for instance, the library that the protagonist sleeps in or the small apartment she rents at the end are some examples spatial frames.

The next layer of narrative space, setting, has a relatively broad meaning, and is defined as the story's socio-historical context. Accordingly, the setting of *Az sheytan* can be formulated as Tehran in the late 1980s during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami.

Ryan, consecutively, theorizes the category of story space as a narrative layer that consists of the spatial frames of a story and the rest of the locations mentioned in the narrative. Correspondingly, this category also incorporates various narrative space to which characters refer in their dreams or fantasies.[303] The protagonist of *Az sheytan*, for example, constantly fantasizes about the places she formerly inhabited: the churches she visited with her family, the international companies at which she was employed, or even the luxurious restaurants she visited. As such, a major advantage of this category, story space, is that it provides a framework to analyze the spatial aspects of the character's imagination.[304]

As will be illustrated in the following section, Aqa'i occasionally uses spatial frames in her novel in order to burrow into an imagined story space, primarily the remembered past. The nostalgia in the novel is strongly space-laden, since, on numerous occasions, a particular location in the present prompts a memory related to another place in the past.

On one occasion, for instance, Volga visits a church and meets Emanu'el, a painter and an old family friend. As the painter invites her to the art gallery, the smell of freshly painted oil paints reminds Volga of Vila Street —officially known as Nejatollahi Street— where she used to take a walk with her uncle Suren. While narrating this memory, she declares her enduring adoration for one particular painting entitled Migration, which depicts a tragic event related to the Armenian genocide during which thousands of Armenians were displaced after fleeing the Ottoman Empire and taking refuge in Persia.[305] The painting portrays a dreadful scene in which Armenians are crossing the river Aras to flee from the attack of

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[301] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Space," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Hühn, Peter et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2020).

[302] Ibid., paragraph 6.

[303] Ibid., paragraph 8.

[304] Ibid., paragraph 9; the fifth and last category of narrative space outlined by Ryan, *narrative (story) world,* refers to the reader's interaction with the text. In this respect, it is defined as the audience's involvement in complementing the geography of the text based on their knowledge and experiences. As reader-oriented discussions are beyond the scope of this study, I will not explore different aspects of this particular layer of the narrative space.

[305] James Barry, *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 79.

the Ottoman guards pursuing them. Since Volga's description of the painting is exceptionally detailed, she is presumably narrating the historical event not only by describing the visual elements of the painting, but also based on her knowledge of the actual historical event. In this way, Volga's elegiac description of the historical episode is three paragraphs long, and she writes about screaming children, dead bodies scattered around, and newlyweds wishing they were dead:

> در میان هق‌هق مردان و زاری زنان و کودکان کسی را توان فرار نیست. مردم کلیدهای آهنی خانه‌هایشان را به آب‌های رود ارس می‌سپارند. وداع ابدی با وطن. [306]
>
> No one is able to escape in the middle of men sobbing, women wailing and children crying. People are throwing their homes' iron keys in the River Aras water. Eternal goodbye to the homeland.[307]

In the passage above, Aqa'i initially introduces a spatial frame, namely, Emanu'el's art gallery. With the protagonist sharing the childhood memory of strolling down Vila Street, the reader is presented with a story space swiftly merging into another story space—the scene of a mass killing set in a location and time that is extremely distant from the current spatiotemporal context. In this example, therefore, the spatial frame functions as a threshold to the subsequent story spaces, the last of which expands through space and time, containing not only the protagonist's lifespan but also a collective historical tragedy of Iranian Armenians.

Additionally, the protagonist's sense of displacement is signified through her relentless obsession with the painting, as she expresses her desire to purchase the piece once she is wealthy enough. The diarist describes that once she talks about this with Emanu'el, he repeats "his usual response," which is that the painting is not for sale. The emphasis on this dialogue, which has previously been exchanged several times, highlights both characters' attachment to the painting, suggesting a shared sense of displacement by Armenians.

This new generation of the community is not like their ancestors per se; being forced to leave a homeland, nevertheless, they are, as demonstrated in this example and as will be discussed in detail in the case of the protagonist, unable to build a harmonious relationship with the space they presently occupy. The symbolic significance of this episode, accordingly, is implied in the protagonist's emphasis on notions such as abandoning "house keys" or saying an "eternal goodbye to the homeland," which foregrounds the sense of displacement as a key factor of their identity formation.

The narrative strategy of having a spatial frame serve as a threshold to other (imagined/remembered) story spaces is also used on several other occasions

[306] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 10.

[307] Farkhondeh Aqa'i, *From the Devil, Learned and Burned*, trans. Mehran Taghvaipur (London: Satrap, 2017), 6.

throughout the novel in a way such that the protagonist's retrospective (and sometimes prospective) contemplations are trigged by the different places she visits. Therefore, by the novel's end, the reader is presented with a map of the character's feelings, which contain her placed-based memories and her fantasies about the places she desires to occupy in the future. The dynamic of these contemplations will be examined later when the protagonist's identity formation in relation to space is discussed.

The narrative space in *Az sheytan*, as mentioned earlier, is closely associated with the protagonist's character development, her emotional dilemma, and her struggles. Since Volga spends a great deal of her time in outdoor spaces, the character's identity is effectively influenced by and constructed through her spatial relations. In the previous section, I analyzed different layers of narrative space in *Az sheytan*. In the following section, I will present a more detailed account of the protagonist's process of identity formation. Afterward, these two themes, identity and space, are woven together to discuss how the character's homelessness and residing in city spaces affects the character's sense of self.

The Protagonist's Identity Construction as a Life Story

As discussed in the introduction of this study, the process of identity formation and the complications associated with it have been an essential theoretical pillar of psychological studies. The matter of identity, especially in recent decades, has also been explored in other disciplines; this has led to a flourish of scholarly literature focusing on the process of identity construction in cultural studies, sociology, literary studies, and geography. The concept of identity, as such, embodies a multitude of theories, each analyzing a distinctive characteristic with various factors that constitute an individual's sense of identity.

The theoretical framework underpinning the discussion of the identity formation of the protagonist of *Az sheytan* in this chapter is Dan P. McAdams' life story concept, which is based on the idea that a person's sense of self is narratively formed. McAdams makes a distinction between "I," the subjective process of creating a narrative self, which in turn creates "Me," the object of the I-process. He labels the subjective process as selfing through which the "I" observes and configures the "Me." He argues, moreover, that the objective "Me" can at times be fragmentary, yet a fragmented "I" can be a symptom of a severe mental illness.[308]

The fact that McAdams emphasizes the benefits of diary or autobiographical writing is another crucial aspect of his theory of identity that will be relevant

[308] I have discussed McAdams' theoretical framework in the second chapter. See: pp 44–45.

when discussing Aqai's book, since, according to McAdams, the act of diary writing renders people a sense of "healing and growth" and assist them in creating "integrative self-narratives."[309]

Accordingly, this theoretical basis informs my discussions about how the protagonist's identity is created as a co-construct of her self-conception and the surrounding spatial elements. It is important to underline, however, that the narrator of *Az sheytan* never expresses any confusion regarding her subjective self, or the "I." Even in the aftermath of severe trauma, the diary entries do not suggest any confusion about self. Nevertheless, Volga's self-conception contains fragmentary and occasionally contradictory entities. The protagonist is, for instance, the mother of a seventeen-year-old son. However, as she has neither the custody of her son nor the financial means to attend to him, she doubts if she deserves to be appreciated as a mother: "I have done nothing for him, so how can I now expect kindness from him?"[310]

The protagonist's religious identity also illustrates this issue: although Volga considers herself an Armenian Christian and constantly visits churches, she reveals in a diary entry that she had to convert to Islam before her wedding. She has, moreover, officially changed her name to Maʿsumeh, an inherently Islamic name with Arabic origin.[311] Adapting her life to Islamic principles, nonetheless, could not save her relationship with her husband and he maintained his unpleasant and degrading attitude, and considered the protagonist a Najes (ritually unclean) woman:

> لباس‌شویی را هم فروختم چون او لباس‌هایش را توی آن نمی‌گذاشت و آبکشی لباسشویی را قبول نداشت. ماشین و مرا نجس می دانست. غذای مرا با اکراه می‌خورد و بعد دهانش را آب می‌کشید.
>
> I sold the washing machine too, because he wouldn't wash his clothes in it, and he wouldn't accept that the washing machine would rinse his clothes properly. He considered the machine, and me, Najes. He would reluctantly eat the food I cooked and then wash his mouth.[312]

This, however, is not the only binary opposition within which the protagonist's sense of identity is negotiated and challenged. Another, and probably the most significant example of the fragmented self-conception of the protagonist is related to her spatiotemporal identity (dis)integration. She compulsively writes, especially in the earlier diary entries, about her past self, the comfortable life she led, and the expensive apartments where she used to live. In other words, based on the "Me" of the past and the places that the "Me" was related to, she expects her present "Me" to be a continuation of what it was before. As this is not the case, the storied account of herself is broken, causing her existential frustration.

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[309] Dan P McAdams, *Art and Science of Personality Development*. (New York: Guilford Publications, 2018), 240.

[310] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 164.

[311] Ibid., 173.

[312] Ibid., 177.

In this way, the diarist is specifically preoccupied with the places she had been connected to before, and she is immensely distressed about losing these places or not being allowed to inhabit them any longer. Given that a person's coherent sense of identity, as mentioned earlier, enables one to perceive continuity and sameness in oneself, this aspect of "sameness" in Volga's identity is deeply rooted in her relationship with the places of her life.[313] Accordingly, in her description of the idealized "Me," she explicitly refers to being able to have a decent home, a place to which she can belong.

Having established that the diarist's primary attribution to her past (and future) "Me" is spatially constructed, and having already laid the groundwork for the two main theoretical dimensions of this chapter —Narrative space and Identity— the discussion will now turn to analyzing the intersection of urban space and identity conflict of the protagonist.

Constructing Identity in Non-places

One of the crucial points concerning the protagonist's process of identity formation in relation to her surrounding space, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, is that the character, for a major part of the narrative, does not reside in one specific, stable place. She has to move constantly from one location to another, and her places of residence are predominantly spaces that are not commonly considered adequate for living and instead are instances of geographical locale mostly known as non-places.

The anthropologist Marc Augé, in his influential book Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, introduces the concept of non-places.[314] In contrast to places, which are sites "of identity, of relations and of history," non-places are transitory and temporal.[315] While visiting non-places—such as airports, supermarkets, buses, and train stations—individuals usually experience "the passive joy of identity loss."[316] Occupants of these sites are not supposed to linger on or ascribe deep personal meanings to these non-places, as they merely function as borders between one definite place and another. Consequently, the engendered identity loss is pleasant since it is temporary, offering brief moments of anonymity to the occupants until they arrive at the places to which they relate and where they are accepted.

With this anthropological view of people-place bonding in mind, in *Az sheytan*, we can examine several non-places, for example, the library, that become the residential place of the protagonist. Although the library does not serve exactly as

[313] Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 37.

[314] Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la Surmodernité*, La Librairie du XXIe siècle (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995).

[315] Marc Augé, *Non-Places,* 52.

[316] Ibid., 83.

a border connecting two definite spaces, it is nevertheless a transitory site whose function is not, by any means, to be the main locus of inhabitancy, since such a building cannot offer stability and security of private living spaces. After only a few nights of sleeping in the library, therefore, the protagonist becomes frustrated over the fact that a non-place has supplanted her habitual place of residence:

> غذا پختن و حمام کردن و ساده‌ترین کارها تبدیل به مصیبیت شده.این‌جا نه می‌توانم آشپزی کنم نه حمام.هنوز لنگ پول غذا و دوا و دکتر هستم.از ساده‌ترین نیازهای زندگی محروم مانده‌ام.فقط جای خواب دارم. 317
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> Cooking, bathing, and the simplest of things have become a nightmare to do nowadays. I cannot cook or bathe here. I still need money for the essential things: food and healthcare. I'm deprived of the most basic things in life. All I have is a place to sleep.[318]

The protagonist's emphasis on the fact that the library only provides her a place to sleep and cannot be appropriated as a suitable residential place is key in understanding her increasing exasperation about her spatial relation to which she refers on several other occasions: "I have not committed a crime, except for being without a place" (in the Persian text: *la-makan*).[319] This exact phrase, to mention another example, is deployed by the protagonist as she begins a diary entry: "Today is exactly four months and six days that I am placeless [(*la-makan*)] and displaced."[320]

Interestingly, in these examples, the protagonist uses *la-makan*, a relatively uncommon word in the Persian spoken language, to convey the difficulties associated with the long-term inhabitancy of a non-place. An originally Arabic term, *la-makan* is constituted by the negative prefix la, and the noun *makan*, meaning place; *la-makan*, accordingly, can be translated as non-place, the antonym of which can be defined as a definite place.[321]

Accordingly, the protagonist's explicit usage of the term, essentially a literal translation of the word non-place, highlights the extent to which she suffers from being associated with the non-place of the library. As will be analyzed later, her predicaments go beyond the inconveniences of being unable to prepare food or take a bath. By residing in a non-place, the narrator has been deprived of forming an emotional and stable bond with a home to which she belongs and in which she feels safe. Similarly, the narrator emphasizes her anxiety about her surroundings once she is expelled from the library by bringing an extratextual element to her diary entries: "After tonight, I will write with a red pen, since the nights of not

317 Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*,9.

318 Aqa'i, *From the Devil*, 4–5.

319 Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 247.

320 Ibid., 251.

321 The expression is also used in Islamic mysticism in relation to the spiritual state of "being beyond location." For an extended elaboration, see: Jamal Malik and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, eds., *Sufism East and West: Mystical Islam and Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Modern World*, Studies on Sufism, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 166.

having a place to sleep have started."[322] The printed novel, of course, only contains black letters, yet, by expressing her anxiety and describing that the diary entries from here onwards are written in red, the narrative explicitly engages the reader with the extent to which the diarist is frightful of her current spatial condition.

Quite interestingly, the dilemma of constructing identity in relation to non-places is not limited to the novel's narrator. Aqa'i fills the urban populace of her story with other characters whose fate constantly reminds Volga of the possible misery looming over homeless individuals in Tehran. One of these characters who is particularly brought into focus in the narrative text, whose situation Volga frequently includes in her writing, is Mr. Rameshi, the middle-aged caretaker of the park near the library. Once he is banished from his small cottage at the park, he starts sleeping on the benches and becomes another inhabitant of Tehran who has to endure the predicaments of having a non-place as a home. As Mr. Rameshi's situation deteriorates further, his aggressive behavior unsettles other inhabitants, resulting in a legal affidavit being drafted by displeased citizens which inquire about his arrest. The narrator deeply sympathizes with Mr. Rameshi, as his condition, although more severe, mirrors her own:

> بیچاره رامشی نمی‌تواند از خودش دفاع کند. من هم نمی‌توانم کاری برایش انجام بدهم. هربار او را می‌بینم، از خدای خودم می‌خواهم کمکم کند تا مجبور نشوم کنار خیابان بخوابم.
>
> Poor Rameshi. He can't defend himself. I also can't do anything for him. Every time I see him, I ask God to help me so I don't have to sleep on the streets."[323]

The narrative's recurrent emphasis on the protagonist's—and other characters'— despair over inhabiting non-places reveals, on a larger scale, how the intersection of power, space, and societal norms triggers in this marginalized group an acute sense of desolation and distress. In addition to the agony of being homeless, their urban presence is deemed problematic and might prompt other citizens to wish for their removal from their neighborhood and the city's façade. This fear, coupled with the protagonist's ongoing problem of finding a proper home, engenders her gradual mental collapse: Volga's self-conception, as the diary entries suggest, becomes all the more fraught with despair regarding the places she is forced to occupy and the fear of losing even these transitory shelters.

In one of her reflections, Volga recalls the events of an unspecified time in the past when she was admitted to a charity center for homeless women. The humiliation of inhabiting such a place even for a short time is extended to her present-day, as she considered the place merely suitable for "addicted women, vagrants of the streets."[324] In response to these embarrassing spatial memories,

[322] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 192.
[323] Ibid., 132.
[324] Ibid., 47.

she also constantly writes about the comfortable places she inhabited before, particularly the places whose qualities satisfied her sense of place, since she could effectively and affectively relate to them. To this end, and based on McAdams' theory, what constitutes the current "Me" of the protagonist in relation to her spatiality is not integrated with the general life story or the selfing process she expected to develop. As a result, the diarist scrutinizes her past "Me" and the places she previously inhabited. This subjective temporal experience is sustained for much of the novel as it evokes memories and reminds the protagonist of a past "Me" who was content in the place she used to occupy. These places, as discussed, are primarily associated with her childhood or her short-term migration experience: "She [the protagonist's current employer who has hired her as a maid] knows that I have seen Hilton Hotels outside Iran. Luxurious hotels on Mediterranean beaches, very expensive with very good food."[325]

This excerpt reveals the protagonist's inner struggle, recollecting accounts of lavish places of the past in order to ease her agony over her recent social decline. It is clear that the only possibility that allows the narrator to endure her undesirable circumstances of being homeless and employed as a low-wage worker is to create a persuasive self-account to remind herself that she does not belong to her current spatial relations, since she writes that her new employer can attest to this fact.

The narrative further accentuates the dynamic between places of the past and places of the present, and their importance for the protagonist, as she expresses her outrage about society's condemnation of her preoccupation with the past. The character constantly receives advice from other characters that she should be less obsessed with this bygone time, and instead, should "throw away the past."[326] The diarist, however, finds this advice impractical since she believes they mistakenly pathologize the fixation on her memories by reducing it to a disengagement from the present. However, the protagonist's act of diary writing and constant recollections of past events is evidence of her quest to construct a coherent "Me," or, as McAdams would say, an integrative self-narrative, throughout her temporary displacement. The geography of the narrative is thus constructed through an amalgamation of the physical and mental spaces (imaginative or memory-based story spaces) described by the character in the diary, which can be seen as the protagonist reviews the "Me" anchored in the past and recollects memories of the formerly occupied places.

Another instance where the writer masterfully explores the overlap between past/present spaces and the protagonist's eagerness to belong to a place is when Volga briefly stays in her grandmother's old room. Frustrated by residing in the non-place of the library, she visits the last place her grandmother lived and asks the current inhabitant, an old Russian Christian woman named Nadizhda

[325] Ibid., 20

[326] Ibid., 83 and 86.

Petrona, to stay there temporarily. As the room is empty, the older woman apathetically accepts. The protagonist finishes this diary entry with this sentence: "at night, I sleep in granny's room in Nadizhda Petrona's house."[327] Out of the eleven diary entries that follow this one, the exact sentence, word for word, is repeated at the end of the account in seven of them. In the four diary entries where she does not write this phrase, she either does not allude to her sleeping place or indicates that she is sleeping in the library.

Although Volga is eventually expelled from her grandmother's room by the daughter of the owner, the place did provide her moderate, albeit short-term, comfort and safety. She emphasizes her despair and disappointment over leaving the place by slightly altering the above-mentioned sentence: "I'm sleeping for the last time in granny's room. Maybe I will never see Nadizhda Petrona and her daughter again."[328] The recurring sentence, although simple and short, encapsulates the two main themes of the novel; place and identity. In other words, not only does sleeping in the grandmother's room offer the protagonist a safe space since she is at ease there, but it also connects her to her ancestral past, facilitating her selfing process.

In the discussed interplay of mental and geographical spaces of past and present, Tehran's urban scene also plays a significant role in the novel. Aqa'i's descriptions of Tehran include not only the accounts related to the statecraft of the city but also the protagonist's emotional associations with the urban setting. The following section examines the relationship between the protagonist's state of mind and urban space. As will be argued, the character's urban sensibility is demonstrated in the ways she connects her life events to the history of the city, as urban allegories have a formative influence on her diary entries.

*Tehrani*an Allegories & the Protagonist's Self-Reflection

In the narrative of *Az sheytan*, spatial symbols are deployed to convey the protagonist's perception of herself and the society she is surrounded by. For instance, on one occasion, Volga explains her humiliation and shame by using an urban symbol as she recounts the events of the day when she went to a mosque to inquire about a new loan. In the mosque, some women criticize the narrator for being a female divorcée, encouraging her to get married in order to be financially secure. The protagonist becomes agitated and describes her irritation:

> احساس می‌کنم کودکی خردسال شده‌ام. یعنی تمام اندازه‌های مرا کوچک کرده‌اند، مثل ماکتی از شهرک اکباتان. شهرک سر جای خودش است، ولی ماکت مدل کوچک شده‌ی اکباتان است. من یک ماکت کوچک شده‌ام بدون امکان رشد.

[327] Ibid., 52.
[328] Ibid., 63.

> I feel like I have been turned into a little child. It means they have reduced all my measurements, like a small replica of Ekbatan town. The town is there in its own place, but the model is a small-scale model of it. I have become a small-scale model without the possibility to grow.[329]

Before analyzing this paragraph, it is helpful to provide some background information about the Ekbatan housing complex, its geographical location, and its history, as it will clarify the protagonist's intention in drawing such a comparison. Ekbatan is a relatively distinguished architectural structure compared to other *Tehrani*an urban structures. The residential complex consists of high-rise housing and is situated in the west of Tehran. An area of more than two million square meters, it was the first westernized mass housing project in Iran, designed and built with the help of American architectural companies.[330] The buildings of Ekbatan are, moreover, constructed based on a unifying template of raw concrete and glass façades whose features, in addition to their extreme height, embody the idea of harmony and stability. Although several housing projects have been initiated by the Iranian government in recent decades, none is comparable to Ekbatan in terms of scale, design, and functionality.

Thus, in the above passage, by comparing herself to this architectural structure, Volga juxtaposes the orderly and safe structure of the Ekbatan complex with her frightened state. Furthermore, the diarist reveals her despair over her decrease in social status and the inability to fulfill her potential, as she believes that she is reduced to a humiliating replica of the buildings.

Likewise, the protagonist's yearning for progress in life and reaching a higher social status is echoed on several other occasions throughout the narrative. For instance, she constantly tries to improve her French proficiency and still manages to sign up for various language courses even though her allowance barely covers her basic needs. The protagonist's frustration in this regard is emphasized in the last sentence of the paragraph, as she expresses that an enduring source of her dissatisfaction is the deprivation of the "possibility to grow." In other words, the protagonist desires to be sturdy and confident, as is the case with the Ekbatan's design, and not merely a small insignificant replica of the buildings.

The urban allegory of Ekbatan is brought up once again after the protagonist is expelled from sleeping in the library. Due to the new manager's rules, Volga is no longer allowed in that space, and so she must sleep in parks, in random office buildings, in hotel lobbies, or in cheap motels. At a moment of utter lassitude, Volga accepts the invitation of a man whom she has just met to stay at his place. Although she somehow anticipates the ulterior sexual motive behind the man's offer, she feels impotent to seek an alternative. The diarist describes the following events in her diary:

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[329] Ibid., 50.

[330] Mohamad Sedighi, "Megastructure Reloaded: A New Technocratic Approach to Housing Development in Ekbatan, Tehran," *ARENA Journal of Architectural Research* 3, no. 1 (2018): 2.

نیمه شب به سراغم آمد. یک بار دیگر خفیف شده‌ام. تعدی، ننگ و تحقیری است که خودم نمی‌دانم با آن چه کنم. با این کار می‌توان از یک انسان یک کودک ساخت. احساس می‌کنم کودکی خردسال شده‌ام. تمام اندازه‌های مرا کوچک کرده‌اند، مثل ماکتی از شهرک اکباتان. سکس ناشی از فقر مرا تحقیر می‌کند. من آن را مثل همه‌ی فلاکت‌هایی که به سرم آمد تحمل می‌کنم.

He came for me at midnight. Once again, I became despicable. Abuse is like a shame, a humiliation, that I don't even know what to do with. It can make a child out of a human being. I feel like a child. They have reduced all my measurements like a small-scale model of Ekbatan. Having sex just out of poverty humiliates me. But I tolerate it like all the other miseries.[331]

Through mentioning Ekbatan's replica, which, as illustrated earlier in the symbolic structure of the story, signifies the protagonist's persistent act of self-abasement, the diarist communicates her distress over the consecutive humiliating incidents. Although the character is humiliated by the abuse, she maintains the degrading relationship with the aggressor momentarily, as suggested by the entries of the next five days. This process further imposes an unbearable psychological burden on the protagonist, which is aptly captured in the constant struggle of her mind and body: while her body yields to the man, her mind resists the interaction—constantly reproaching, resisting, and objecting. Eventually, she retreats to the destructive pattern of self-loathing behavior: "He didn't come home tonight. I looked in the mirror, and I hated myself."[332]

Another instance of an analogy between urban-related issues and the protagonist's life can be observed in a diary entry in which the narrator elaborates on a recently read book entitled The Mayors of Tehran. Of all the mayors mentioned in the book, she expresses deep sympathy with Gholam Hoseyn Karbaschi: "I felt pity for Karbaschi. They want to whip him; they did nothing to set him free."[333]

Once again, before proceeding with the analysis of the paragraph in focus, it is crucial to offer a brief and general introduction to Karbaschi and his political career. Karbaschi was the mayor of Tehran from 1990 to 1998. Due to corruption charges, he was arrested at the end of his mayorship, and the subsequent trials which led to his conviction and imprisonment are considered one of the most decade-defining events in Iranian urban history. Karbaschi was targeted by conservative forces and was charged with corruption and fraud, although for some citizens, he was considered the "face of pragmatism and reform," and the end of his mayorship signified that "Iran's urban life would never be the same."[334]

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[331] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*,198.

[332] Ibid., 201.

[333] Ibid., 163.

[334] Ali Gheissari and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 138; Laura Secor, *Children of Paradise: The Struggle for the Soul of Iran* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), 222.

Interestingly, the protagonist of Aqa'i's novel does not necessarily reflect on the political aspect of the mayor's trial, nor is she concerned with the details of the controversial lawsuit. She commiserates with Karbaschi over the fact that even his close political connections did not support him in a significant way during the trials and could not prevent his imprisonment. As such, by sympathizing with this particular aspect of Karbaschi's account, the narrator conveys her disappointment in her social circle, whose neglect, she believes, has dragged her to the ultimate misery of being "lonely, enslaved, and shelterless."[335]

It is important to note that the spatial allegories are not the only references to the city in the narrative text. The urban environment of Tehran becomes significant and reveals its shocking nature through the sexual trauma that significantly agitates the protagonist. As mentioned earlier, the protagonist is at some point expelled from the library and thus, becomes completely homeless. Frustrated by sleeping on park benches, she takes refuge in a church named Philadelphia located at Qods Street. The name of the street is an Arabic loan word meaning sanctum, or a holy place, and given that on the second night of her stay at the church, Volga is violently raped by the janitor, the title bears an ominously ironic connotation. The traumatizing effect of this incident is intensified, especially since the protagonist has a deep emotional connection with the church as a place of refuge and the assumption is that she can be safe and secure there. Although she narrates the events of the night in short, frequently interrupted sentences that convey her terrified state of mind, she reports on the sexual assault thoroughly and explicitly:

> برای خودم پتو پهن کردم و چراغ را خاموش کردم و دراز کشیدم. چند لحظه بعد هیجان‌زده و پریشان به اتاق آمد و از پشت به من حمله کرد و با من درگیر شد. غافلگیر شده بودم. موهایم را می‌کشید و صورتم را روی زمین می‌کوبید. از حرکاتش شوکه شده بودم و فقط دست و پا می‌زدم. به صورتش چنگ زدم ولی زورم به او نمی‌رسید. آنقدر صورتم را به زمین کوبید که لبم پاره شد و از دهانم خون آمد. بعد از رفتن او ساکم را برداشتم و از اتاق بیرون رفتم.
>
> I spread a blanket for myself on the ground, turned off the light, and lay down. Moments later, he came into the room excited and distraught, attacked me from behind, and got into a fight with me. I was surprised. He pulled my hair and hit my face on the ground. I was shocked by his behavior. I struggled. I scratched his face, but I was not as strong as him. He hit my face so many times against the floor that it bled. After he left, I took my bag and left the room.[336]

As a central event in the narrative plot of *Az sheytan*, the aftermath of the sexual assault affects the protagonist's subsequent activities and also serves in the novel to call attention to the gender-biased social norms and repressive urban pol-

[335] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 29.
[336] Ibid., 229.

icies in Iran. I want to elaborate on and emphasize this latter point since representations of rape in fiction, as Sabine Sielke suggests in her book about the literary and cultural illustrations of sexual assaults, are a "rhetorical device" that reveal "other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts."[337]

One of the social concerns and conflicts being exposed after this event in *Az sheytan* is illustrated through the rapist's behavior. The janitor of the church is reassured that the current socio-legal rules and regulations ultimately protect him. He demonstrates this as Volga attempts to leave the church, by boasting that she has no power in any case and cannot do anything.[338] The rapist's behavior discourages the protagonist even further. Therefore, since she is still perplexed by the assault, she retreats to the storeroom of the church to sleep, the place where she was raped just moments earlier.

Likewise, the narrator's social circle reacts to Volga's trauma mainly by dismissing it. The protagonist, for instance, reports in her diary that an acquaintance has told her: "*'En-sha'-Allah* (If God wills it), such things won't happen to you again."[339] Not only does society avoid extending sympathy to Volga at the time she desperately needs it, but her social network also adapts an attitude of victim-blaming, as seen when a high-ranking church manager blames Volga for the sexual assault: "wherever I send you, something like this would happen. Don't come to this church again."[340]

On another occasion, an old family friend advises the protagonist to remain silent, warning her that she might lose her honor and reputation. Silencing victims after sexual trauma is considered one of the unfortunately very typical and highly problematic societal reactions since it can eventually lead to the victims' feeling of disempowerment and increase the traumatizing aftereffects of sexual assault.[341] In this respect, while the protagonist is encouraged to remain silent, and although the accuracy of her traumatic experience is suspected by society, the act of writing in the diary takes on a therapeutic function that she is not receiving from her entourage, as we see in the entries of the following days, which are considerably longer and more detailed and filled with the diarist's sense of desperation, humiliation, and shame.

As pointed out earlier, it is not only society that fails the protagonist. The ineffectual legislative procedures also do not bring her much relief, as the narrator's effort to seek justice through the judiciary system is largely disappointing.

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[337] Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790–1990* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002), 2.

[338] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand*, 229.

[339] Ibid.

[340] Ibid., 231.

[341] For a detailed examination of the adverse effects of societal reactions concerning the silencing of rape victims and how this can reinforce a feeling of self-blame, see: Courtney E. Ahrens, "Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 38, no. 3–4 (December 2006): 263–274.

In order to prove that she has been raped, she has to undergo strenuous examinations and procedures, both physical and psychological. Ultimately, her claim is disqualified due to the lack of evidence, and Volga is sent to a charity center for homeless women. The center's name is Omidvar, which means hopeful in the Persian language. This name stands in stark juxtaposition to the realities of Volga and other women's terrible conditions who visit the center. This, once again, illustrates an instance of Aqa'i's ironic rhetoric of deploying suggestive street names and other locations in the novel that subversively showcase the grim and unfortunate state of the individuals occupying them.

Interestingly enough, in the highly isolating environment in which the protagonist is confined, her ultimate solace springs from the city of Tehran. During the recovery process after the assault, as mentioned above, the narrator resides at Omidvar center, located at Farmaniyeh Street. Moreover, the center is situated just a few blocks from the Embassy of Vietnam, and the narrator mentions that "Vietnam is a country that has the highest rate of raped women and men among the war-stricken countries."[342] Although the tone of this diary entry, in this particular sentence, is flat and the protagonist is merely reporting on the geographical location of the embassy and one associated statistic, it is another instance in which a spatial frame is linked to a broader story space. In this way, the text proceeds from the immediate physical surrounding of Omidvar center to the Embassy and is extended to the story space of Vietnam in wartime, bringing into sharper focus and highlighting the prevalence of sexual violence in the country in question.

In this respect, although Tehran's city space fails to provide Volga with the security she needs and the urban populace of Tehran disappoints her, the protagonist's urban wanderings lead her to a place where she is reminded of and is confronted with the collective suffering of people who experience sexual assault. As such, she feels less secluded in having experienced such a trauma. Once the protagonist is able to situate her agony within a historical collective trauma of sexual violence, she is able to relate to a large group of women (and men) who have also borne similar suffering in isolation. The alleviating effect of this process is illustrated through the way in which this event serves as a decisive change in the course of the narrative. Immediately afterward, Volga actively and inexhaustibly starts looking for a small place of her own in order to put an end to her placelessness.

As mentioned in the introduction, although the protagonist manages to rent a small flat by the end of the story, her spatial predicaments are far from over; Volga mentions that the condescending behavior of the landlord's wife discourages her from considering the apartment her ultimate home: "I need to look for somewhere so that I can leave here. I don't want anybody to have my address. I

[342] Aqa'i, *Az sheytan amukht va suzand,* 244.

don't belong to any family. One cannot force herself to belong somewhere! Everyone was good and dignified, and I was not. I have no need to socialize."[343]

Quite curiously, the last diary entry of the novel also suggests that the protagonist's social displacement as a homeless woman has left an irremediable mark on her life, and she can no longer integrate into society with ease. The entry narrates the events of New Year's Eve, a seemingly eventless day for Volga filled with many mundane activities such as running errands in order to furnish the new flat, buying kitchen appliances, and finally, visiting the Virgin Mary Church at *Si-ye tir* Street. "Eating one piece of holy wine-dipped bread caressed my soul," she writes. "For lunch, I went to the restaurant at the Rudaki Hotel, and I ordered a substantial meal for myself."[344]

In this way, the last textual glimpse at Volga's life captures her in the corner of a restaurant. That the diarist prefers to eat at a hotel's restaurant, presumably because it is less crowded, highlights her ongoing sense of social alienation, implying that her search for a place she would belong has not been fully accomplished. However, it is equally significant to mention that in the last diary entries, the protagonist does not show any obsession with her past self or the places she formerly occupied. The narrator refuses to express, as she did in earlier entries, a yearning to re-inhabit the places of the past. She instead plans for her future, determined to leave her current place as soon as she finds a better home. In this respect, although the protagonist's spatial conflict is not resolved, her "selfing" process is no longer focused on a futile attempt to reconstruct the "Me" through her former spatial associations. At this point of her life, the narrator occupies a relatively proper home and is not forced to inhabit a non-place, and she also has a more realistic self-conception.

At the beginning of the novel, Volga writes about a day trip to Masuleh, a small village near Tehran. On the bus, the tour guide pulls the curtains, announcing to his female fellow travelers that he would warn them as the bus approaches a police station by shouting, "hoist the sail (*Badban-ha ra bekeshid*)!" and that when they are no longer in the vicinity of the police authority, he would call out "furl the sail (*Badban-ha ra bardarid*)!" so they can remove their scarves. The diarist greatly enjoys the trip and wishes that "these moments would never end."[345]

In the protagonist's narrative trajectory of displacement, there is no final resolution or sudden reversal of fortune. The novel ends, leaving the protagonist in a slightly better condition and occupying a slightly better place than she had at the start of the novel. Nevertheless, her journey to inhabit a place she belongs is not finalized. Sails hoisted or furled, Volga unflaggingly continues her strenuous urban journey.

In the next section, I will analyze Salar's novel and her protagonist's relationship with her surrounding space. As will be clarified, both characters share

[343] Ibid., 302.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid., 25.

similarities in regard to their spatial associations, although their process of identity formation is largely different.

The Voyage of Self Discovery: Body, Space & Identity in *Ehtemalan*

In the third chapter, I approached the protagonist of *Ehtemalan*'s narrative as a *flâneuse*, examining her urban adventure through her essentially inquisitive *flâneuse*an standpoint. I have also briefly discussed the theme of identity clash in the novel, which is tightly interwoven with the narrator's bodily history and relationship to her spatial surroundings. In this section, I follow the analytical terrain developed in the previous subchapter, and in doing so, I will elaborate on the spatial sensitivity and the process of identity construction of the protagonist, examining how these issues are presented in the text.

In *Ehtemalan*, the themes of space and identity are brought forward early on in the narrative, as the novel opens with the persistent sound of a ringing phone, which irritates the protagonist. She assumes that her husband is on the other end of the line, and she is reluctant to answer it: "he wants to know if I am at home or not."[346] In the subsequent paragraphs, frequent clues are dropped to highlight the unstable mental state of the protagonist: she is confused about her whereabouts, she is unsure of what time it is, and she cannot remember where her son is. Wandering around the house to look for her son, she is finally relieved to remember that she had sent him to kindergarten in the morning. In parallel with this episode is the protagonist's first recollection of the past. In this memory, the protagonist recalls a fight with Gandom, who is introduced as a childhood friend. After the fight, the protagonist regrets her hostile behavior and looks for her friend, to no avail:

> به مهمان‌خانه می‌روم...نیست...به اتاق مادربزرگش می‌روم...نیست[...]برمی‌گردم توی حیاط...دلم هری می‌ریزد پایین، باغچه‌ها نیستند، درخت‌های توت و انار و سنجد نیستند[...] نفس می‌کشم، هوایی نیست، نفس می‌کشم، هوایی...
>
> I go to the living room...she is not there...I go to her grandmother's room...she is not there [...] I go back to the courtyard... I am aghast suddenly, the gardens are not there, mulberry, pomegranate, and wild-olive trees are not there [...] I breathe...the air is not there, I breathe, the air...[347]

The above passage, as mentioned earlier, already underlines the protagonist's fixation on the spaces that surround her and her ultimate fear of losing this space. The focalizer who narrates this memory is not the childhood version of the protagonist. It is instead the adult narrator who gives the memory a grim quality by bluntly extending it to a harrowing extreme in which space turns into a void,

[346] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 7.
[347] Ibid., 9.

and she feels nearly suffocated. In this hallucinatory imagery, the spatial significance of the protagonist's memories is established, and the extent to which the narrator's self-conception is dependent on her sense of spatiality is underscored. Therefore, the fear of losing the familiar places is equated with the character being asphyxiated, indicating the metaphorical demise of the narrator.

Another essential component of the protagonist's process of self-conception, in addition to the role that space plays, is the notion of the body. The narrator of *Ehtemalan* frequently recalls memories that are somewhat related to or centered around her bodily experience, and she is constantly exploring how her body has been affected by the space surrounding her. The protagonist's body incessantly asserts its presence throughout the narrative by cueing the narrator to retrieve and then ruminate on her memories.

At the beginning of the novel, for instance, the narrator describes having two bruises on her eyelid and her left wrist. She persistently conceals these marks by applying makeup or covering the bruise on her wrist with her sleeve. Although the narrator refuses to explicitly divulge the cause of these injuries, it is as though their presence reminds the protagonist to evoke memories related to her body's traumas. I will return to the function of the bruises as a recurring motif and I will explore how it escalates suspense and slyly discloses the problematic aspects of the body memories of the protagonist.

Another significant point regarding the protagonist's identity struggle, as mentioned in the third chapter, is the account of a character named Gandom. She is initially introduced as a childhood friend, but as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Gandom has been invented by the protagonist so that she can reconcile with the rebellious part of her identity. The issue of this imagined friendship is the most significant factor in the protagonist's identity construction (and identity conflict).[348] However, before delving into analyzing how the protagonist's sense of identity is textualized, I will take a step back to focus on how the notions of space and body are formulated in the novel, and then in the concluding section, I will explore how these concepts are related to and essentially articulate the character's complex practice of identity construction.

The Dynamic of Body/Space Relation

Among the novels assessed in this study, *Ehtemelan* is an example of one that explicitly and extensively deals with the experience of female bodies in the present-day urban public space of Iran. The other novels, in one way or another, also address this issue, but Sara Salar introduces the notion of the body as one of the main themes of her novel, functioning as a bridge between the two other significant themes of identity and space.

[348] I will come back to this point later in this chapter when I address the identity conflict of the protagonist in detail and explore the textual hints in the narrative suggesting that Gandom is a character who is only real in the narrator's mind.

The relationship between body and space, and in particular urban space, has been investigated by scholars of various disciplines, underpinning the importance of the process of embodiment in human spatiality. One of the earliest and most influential theories regarding spatial embodiment, for example, was proposed by Henry Lefebvre in his seminal book, The Production of Space, in which he argues: "each living body is space and has space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space."[349] In this reciprocal relationship, while the body produces space, "the laws of space" determine how the body inhabits that space. This, in turn, engenders "spatial bodies" (my emphasis) whose "material character derives from space, from the energy that is deployed and put to use there."[350] So dependent is Lefebvre's conception of space on the bodily experience of individuals that Andy Merrifield states: "[c]uriously, in The Production of Space there are as many index entries for 'the body' as there are for 'Karl Marx' and 'Marxism.' The Production of Space is, then, very much the production of bodies in space."[351]

Accordingly, our essentially spatial bodies walk around, inhabit, or depart from spaces in which they create and are created by them. It is, however, important to notice that both body and space are wrought by underlying social, cultural, and political discourses. Space, in particular, can give an "illusion of transparency" which stems from its intelligibility.[352] As a result, and due to this inherent characteristic of space, it is important to consider and also analyze space as a social construct that is "imbued with power of different kinds."[353] Likewise, the body is not a mere biological entity separating an individual's subjectivity from external spaces, as our bodies are, in Elizabeth Grosz's parlance, fictionalized. By applying this term, Grosz as a prominent feminist geographer, argues that bodies are "positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses, which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms, and representational forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives, narratives not always or even usually transparent to themselves."[354]

That is to say, any analysis concerning the body/space relationship would be incomplete without taking into account the complex nature of these two interrelated factors. Examining this relationship is, moreover, challenging, since bodies are not static entities that are located in a fixed space. They mutually, effi-

[349] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 170.

[350] Ibid., 195.

[351] Andy Merrifield, *The Politics of the Encounter*, Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation 19 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 109.

[352] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 27.

[353] Valerie Briginshaw, *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 3.

[354] E. A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 118.

ciently, and ceaselessly change one another, and both of them are part of the virtually invisible yet ontologically undeniable underlying socio-cultural narratives and discourses.

In view of this brief theoretical framework, I aim to explore which cultural, social, or political discourses and which spatial narratives have informed, transformed, and challenged the bodily account in the case of *Ehtemalan's* protagonist.

An important factor in this interplay is the cultural-specific laws of space through which the protagonist's body is disciplined. This matter is extensively illustrated in the Zahedan's memories, where the cultural narratives of a relatively conservative town have been inscribed and left their longstanding effects on the protagonist's body. This is best captured in the accounts of how the narrator constantly struggles with the imposed dress code during her adolescent years. As we can see in the narrator's recollection of the past in the text, she was frequently dealing with unresolvable inner conflicts as she struggled to adjust her appearance to comply with the regulations about what she could wear. Her traditional family demanded that she wear a chador, an Islamic garment covering a woman's body from head to heels, which covers the top of the head and extends to cover a woman's entire body. As an adult narrator, the protagonist is still irritated with the imposed way of dressing during her adolescent years, although she is not forced to wear it any longer.

As such, the prevalence of chador imagery in the novel illustrates that the character has not succeeded in resolving this previous struggle related to her body. Answering her therapist's inquiries about how she perceives her experience of wearing this type of Islamic veil during her adolescent years, for instance, she recalls:

> می‌خواهم سرم را بیندازم پایین و فکر کنم از کی، از کی این چادر سیاه کلفت را سر کرده‌ام.
>
> به دکتر گفتم: چهارم یا پنجم دبستان، از وقتی شنیده بودم اگر یک تار موی زن را نامحرم ببیند، توی جهنم به همان یک تار مو آویزان می‌شود.
>
> I want to lower my head and think, how long, how long have I put on this thick black chador? In fourth or fifth grade, since I heard that if a non-mahram sees one single strand of a woman's hair, she will be hanged with the same hair in hell, I told the therapist.[355]

The passage above addresses the nexus of body-space in the novel and also brings one aspect of it into sharper focus regarding the protagonist's corporeal history. She confesses that her incentive to wear the chador during her adolescence was mainly based on a sense of foreboding which originated from the Islamic narratives of the afterlife, especially those associated with punishing

[355] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am,* 27.

women who have morally transgressed.[356] On several other occasions throughout the novel, the narrator refers to her preoccupation with such religiously driven views regarding the afterlife. Due to the persistent anxiety caused by imagining these forms of brutal retribution, the protagonist forced herself to strictly adhere to Islamic teachings and practices. The excessively religious phase of the narrator's life, however, was interrupted and challenged upon meeting Gandom, or, to put it more precisely, upon becoming acquainted with the rebellious part of herself:

> به دکتر گفتم: «از ده سالگی، یعنی از همان وقت که پدرم مرد، تا چهارده سالگی حتا یک رکعت نمازم قضا نشده بود. نگذاشته بودم یک تار مویم را نامحرم ببیند. شب و روز قلبم از فشار قبر له شده بود و هنوز نمی‌دانستم کجای کارم و خدا کجاست و گندم‌خانم یک‌کاره با آن ادا و اطوارهاش می‌گفت هیچ‌کس توی دلش مثل او خدا را حس نکرده.
>
> I told the therapist: from the age of ten, that is, from when my father died until the age of fourteen, I hadn't missed a single *rak'at* [unit of Islamic prayer] in my prayers. I did not let a non-mahram see a single strand of my hair. My heart was crushed day and night by imagining the pressure of the grave, and I still did not know if I was doing alright, or where God was, and then suddenly missy Gandom, with those charming manners of hers, would say no one has ever felt God like her in her heart.[357]

Quite significantly, the narrator's references to her anxiety in the passage above are not only another account related to Islamic eschatology but also a space-specific one. According to this Islamic doctrine of the afterlife, the tomb of the blameworthy person is small and confining to punish them for their past misdeeds. Accordingly, what unsettles the protagonist in this entombment imagery is the sense of constriction and pressure of the grave, and thus, envisioning the absence of space. The protagonist's emphasis on the terrorizing effect of this imagery and her fear of claustrophobic spaces is in total juxtaposition with a scene narrated just a few pages later in which she recounts the first time she embodies the public space in a slightly more liberated manner. In this later memory, the protagonist narrates the events of the day she receives the news of being admitted into a university in Tehran. Feeling ecstatic, she swiftly runs into Zahedan's streets: "For a moment, I forgot we were on the street."[358] The protagonist's body

[356] The issue of hijab has been intensively debated in academia and has resulted in an ever-growing body of literature. Some scholars suggest that the Islamic head-covering in Muslim societies has less of a religious origin and is rather a social construct to subjugate women to male dominance. For example, see: Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: MaleFemale Dynamics in Muslim Society*. Other research studies, per contra, discuss the beneficial effects of wearing the Islamic veil by arguing that the hijab can facilitate women's active presence in societies and challenge patriarchal norms. For instance, see: Mussap, "Strength of Faith and Body Image in Muslim and Non-Muslim Women;" Trisha M. Dunkel, Denise Davidson, and Shaji Qurashi, "Body Satisfaction and Pressure to Be Thin in Younger and Older Muslim and Non-Muslim Women."

[357] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 44–45.

[358] Ibid., 53

and clothing play a vital role in recounting this memory, as the narrator emphasizes that her chador was blowing away with the wind while she ran, and she could barely hold it with two fingers. The joyful moment, however, is disturbed by the customary special laws of her hometown:

> من و گندم...هر دو...تهران...توی یک دانشگاه...یک رشته...کاغذها می‌رقصیدند، انگار ما هم داشتیم می‌رقصیدیم. همه‌اش یک لحظه بود. یا شاید عین یک لحظه بود، کوتاه[...] و دوباره یادم آمد که توی خیابان هستیم و دوباره سرهایی که تکان می‌خوردند، لب‌هایی که گزیده می‌شدند، دل‌هایی که اخم می‌کردند، پاهایی که نمی‌رقصیدند، تن‌هایی که زیربار آن همه لباس له شده بودند، و دوباره پوزخند و متلک، جیگرت را...چادرم را سفت کردم و روم را گرفتم که یک وقت کسی من را نشناسد.
>
> Me and Gandom...both...Tehran...in the same university...the same major...the papers danced, it was as if we were dancing too. It was just a moment. Or maybe it seemed just like a moment, short]...[and then I remembered again that we were on the street and again the heads which were shaking in disapproval, the lips which were biting, the hearts which were being troubled, the feet which were not dancing, the bodies which were bending under the burden of all those clothes, and again grinning and teasing, catcalling...I adjusted my chador firmly and hid my face so no one would recognize me.[359]

In this example, Sara Salar's narrative language layers the protagonist's recollection in a way that not only narrates a specific memory but it also functions as a prism to reveal other unnarrated memories. For instance, once the protagonist becomes conscious that she is in the public space and under the scrutiny of other inhabitants, the past continuous forms of the verbs are used to describe her observations. In this way, no specific person shakes his/her head in disapproval; it is rather heads as a plural form, which were shaking. In doing so, the narrative suggests the narrator has experienced the uncomfortable feeling of being under the scrutiny of others on numerous other occasions in the public space of her hometown. Furthermore, this paragraph subtly alludes to the fact that the protagonist has been subjected to street harassment, as she talks about "catcalling" and the unsettling feeling of hearing sexually charged verbal conduct in public. Interestingly, the issue of being the object of an unwanted gaze still affects the narrator in her adulthood, and particularly as a *Tehrani*an *flâneuse*, the dynamics of which I discussed thoroughly in the third chapter.

Another significant aspect of spatial configuration in the novel is that, based on Marie-Laure Ryan's classification, the borderline that differentiates various categories of narrated space in *Ehtemalan* is often vague and constantly changes from one category to another. For instance, on several occasions, the protagonist describes a spatial frame or her immediate surroundings, and subsequently, the course of the narrative is abruptly interrupted by a story space or a remembered space. The excerpt below, depicting a scene in which the restless

[359] Ibid., 54.

narrator is stuck in the traffic and the cars are moving slowly, aptly exemplifies the swift change between narrative spaces:

> این ترافیک حتما دلیل دیگری هم جز این باران دارد. از آن ترافیک‌های غیرقابل انتظار است...غیر قابل انتظار...قسم خورده بودم دیگر با گندم توی خیابان نروم، از بس که توی خیابان کرکر و هرهر می‌کرد، از بس که دختر به آن گندگی دلش می‌خواست از روی جوی آب بپرد، از بس که مقنعه یا روسری اش همه اش فرق سرش بود، از بس که حالی‌اش نبود کجا زندگی می‌کنیم و بقیه درباره‌مان چی فکر می‌کنند.
>
> There must be some other reason for this traffic besides the rain. It is one of those unpredictable traffic delays ... unpredictable... I had sworn that I would never go out in the streets with Gandom, so many times she chuckled and giggled in the streets, so many times such a big girl wanted to jump over the water streams, so many times her maqnaʿeh or scarf was so loose that it only covered half of her hair, so many times she didn't understand where we lived or what others thought of us.[360]

The spatial frame in this scene depicts the immediate surrounding space of the protagonist, namely, her car stuck in a traffic jam. In the following memory-based story spaces, however, the reader is suddenly confronted with a relatively extensive description of the unconventional spatial practices of the narrator in her hometown. This pattern of interstitial spaces of the past interrupting her present is frequently seen in the narrative, communicating the protagonist's detachment from the present-time spatiotemporal context. The character frequently distances herself from the space she presently occupies, and slips into memories, most of which are somehow related to the issue of corporeal spatiality.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, one of the most significant signs of the protagonist's identity conflict is reflected in her constant internal dialogue with a childhood friend named Gandom. Yet, throughout the remainder of the story, it gradually becomes clear that Gandom is a product of the narrator's imagination. In the following section, I provide a detailed account regarding this matter.

The Protagonist's Fragmented Self-conception

Before analyzing the entanglements of identity, space, and body in the novel, I would like to rearticulate briefly what Salar's novel is about, and what exactly her main character pursues throughout the narrative. In *Ehtemalan*, the protagonist, a 35-year-old woman, constantly reflects on her memories, especially her broken relationship with a close friend, while she aimlessly and continuously wanders Tehran. As the story unfolds and the scattered clues of the narrative fall into place, it becomes clear that the protagonist's friend, Gandom, is an imaginary character. Throughout the novel, the narrator has configured and split her self-

[360] Ibid., 51; *maqnaʿeh* is a form of hijab that covers the entire head, shoulders, and chest. In Iran, it is the obligatory head-covering required for female students and women in the workforce.

conception based on two distinctive subjects: on the one hand, there is the timid, passive and obedient self, and on the other hand, the active, stubborn and subversive self, the attributes of whom the character ascribes to the so-called close friend, Gandom.

Following McAdams' theory of the selfing process, the imaginary friend and the protagonist's constant conversation with this friend might seem to suggest that the narrator suffers from a fragmented "I", and thereby, perhaps, a severe mental illness. This could be the case, yet, in my analysis, I choose to treat the protagonist's act of creating the imaginary friend as a fragmented "Me." According to this assumption, the constant interaction with an imaginary friend is rather a therapeutic process to help the protagonist come to terms with the significant traumatic changes in her life. I have chosen this approach partly because a psychoanalytic examination of fictional characters is beyond the scope of this study, and also, the textual clues in the narrative suggest that the protagonist acknowledges Gandom as part of herself. However, in reviewing her memories, she needs to temporarily distance herself from this former self to build a slightly more coherent "Me."

Several hints in the narrative suggest that Gandom is only present in the protagonist's contemplations and thoughts, and that other characters of the novel have no interaction with her. For instance, the narrator confesses to the therapist that she does not have any photos of Gandom. On another occasion, when the protagonist meets her old lover, Farid Dehdar, he promptly greets the narrator by calling her Gandom, indicating that he also knows that Gandom is in fact the protagonist's imaginary friend.[361] Moreover, the final paragraph of the novel, which is the protagonist's last reflection about Gandom, also communicates this idea. The narrator imagines meeting Gandom in the city, gazing and smiling at her: "After these many years, I feel when I smile, I also have dimples on my cheeks."[362] The dimples are one of Gandom's most salient physical characteristics that the protagonist constantly refers to throughout the novel. Hence, the narrator attributes this physical trait to herself, admitting that she is, in fact, Gandom. Another notable feature of this specific paragraph is the peaceful tone of the narration, which indicates that the protagonist's identity struggles have been resolved, at least to some extent, as it also conveys that the narrator has discerned and accepted Gandom as herself.

Returning to the process of identity construction in the novel, the protagonist's sense of self, like that of the diarist of *Az sheytan*, constantly shifts throughout the narrative. She is in constant negotiation with herself as she explores the socially-ascribed aspects of her identity and her conception of who she is. As discussed in the third chapter, for example, the narrator's mixed feelings about her parents are illustrated through several instances in which she recalls being isolated and misunderstood during her childhood. Due to her mother's addiction,

[361] Ibid., 97 & 135.
[362] Ibid., 143.

she was forced to take care of her twin brothers, which was a duty that the protagonist, merely a teenager, did not particularly enjoy. One of the outcomes is that the adult narrator relentlessly questions her identity as a mother. She is enamored of Samyar, her son, and at the same time, is repelled by the responsibility of being a mother: "I caress his back. I caress his belly; I think maybe I have the right to kill him. Wasn't I the one who created him? When I gave him life, wasn't I the one who also gave him his death? So, I can wrap my arms around his neck like this and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze."[363]

It is, however, important to highlight that while the protagonist's extremely morbid thoughts regarding her maternal duty occasionally resurface in the narrative, she is generally represented in the narrative text as a tender, protective, and patient mother in her everyday life.

The maternal aspect, nevertheless, is not the only identity-related dilemma the protagonist deals with. The most salient challenge regarding the process of identity formation and identity transformation of the protagonist, as mentioned before, is related to the space/body dimension. Having thus far outlined the textual characteristics of identity struggles and the body/space relation in Salar's novel, in the following section, I will argue that the protagonist's identity crisis is induced by the semantic inconsistency she experiences in relation to her surrounding space, which, in itself, is related to the struggles she carries at the somatic level.

Topography of Self-conception, Space, and Body

Generally, *Ehtemalan* is as much a story about identity as it is about spatiality: the protagonist's identity, to a large degree, is shaped by the discipline of space; gender-specific norms in the urban public space play an essential role in this regard. The simple act of running in the public space, as was the case with the paragraph mentioned earlier, was deemed problematic for the protagonist during her adolescent years and in her hometown, since running was not considered a societally-approved practice for a female body in that traditional environment.

Consequently, moving to the megacity of Tehran slightly liberates the protagonist's bodily experiences from these strict conventions, as, for instance, she immediately embraces her new freedom by removing the chador she had been forced to wear. Narrating this event, the protagonist once again evokes the memory of running in Zahedan's streets, the brisk wind, and holding the chador with two fingers:

به دکتر گفتم: «از همان روز اول دانشگاه چادرم را برداشتم، همان چادری که داشت با باد می‌رفت و من فقط با دو انگشت نگهش داشته بودم.»

[363] Ibid., 122.

I told the therapist: "On the first day at the university, I took off my chador, the same chador that was being carried away in the wind, and I held it between only two fingers.[364]

The newly discovered urban freedom of Tehran, however, does not end the protagonist's bodily struggle. The narrative suggests that although the cityscape of Tehran opened up new possibilities for the narrator to occupy space with more liberty, it brought forward other challenges and distinctive bodily struggles.

Before discussing how the urban setting of Tehran makes its imprint on the body and identity crisis of the protagonist, it is important to emphasize, once more, that a major part of the bodily struggles of the protagonist have been engendered by being subjected to the socio-spatial regulations of her childhood city. In Tehran and as an adult, however, the protagonist mainly hides these somatic struggles and only deals with them in solitude. This issue is best captured in the passages in which the narrator reveals her enduring passion for dancing, yet she also regrets that, due to her problematic corporeal struggles, she is not able to freely move her body:

که من دلم رقص می‌خواسته، کمی تاریکی، کمی موزیک، و فکر کرده‌ام که انگار دیگر فرصتی نیست برای رقصیدن[...] واقعا اگر کیوان یک‌هو بلند می‌شد و می‌دید که من با آن گوشی‌های روی گوش‌هام توی آن سالن نیمه‌تاریک دارم می‌رقصم چه فکری می‌کرد؟ اگر می‌دید که آن‌جور دور خوردم می‌چرخم،[...]، که آن‌جور قشنگ می‌رقصم، که خودم هم باورم نمی‌شود آن‌جور قشنگ می‌رقصم،[...] یواش می‌خندم و دست کسی را می‌گیرم و کسی دست‌هاش را حلقه می‌کند دور کمرم،[...] کسی که می‌تواند با چشم‌هاش حرف بزند، کسی که می‌تواند با چشم‌هاش بهم بگوید که محشرم، که معرکه می‌رقصم،[...] و یک‌هو می‌ایستم و زل می‌زنم به خودم توی آن آینه‌ی فلان‌فلان‌شده، و زل می‌زنم به این آدمی که گم شده است، گم شده است توی آن آسمان سیاه پرستاره.

I wanted to dance, a little bit of darkness, a little bit of music, and it seemed as though there was no more time for dancing [...]. Really, what would Keyvan think if he suddenly woke up and saw me dancing with those headphones over my ears in that half-dark living room? If he could see me spin around like that, [...], see me dancing so beautifully, I can't even believe that I dance so beautifully [...] I laugh quietly and take someone's hand and he wraps his arm around my waist [...]. Someone who can communicate with his eyes, someone who can tell me with his eyes that I'm amazing, that I dance wonderfully [...]. I suddenly stop, and I stare at myself in that damn mirror, and I stare at this person who is lost, lost in that black starry sky."[365]

Accordingly, the only secure place for the narrator to dance is her living room in the middle of the night when no one can observe her. The narrator points out that she wears headphones, and thus, this solitary act of listening to music and simultaneously dancing, creates an intimately personal space. Moreover, she

[364] Ibid., 91.
[365] Ibid., 110.

confesses that only in the absence of anyone observing her can she finally spontaneously express how she wants her body to move. The narrative of the episode of the midnight dance delineates an emancipative image of the protagonist who is comfortable within the personal space that she occupies. She even envisions a compassionate partner within this space with whom she dances. Similar to the memory of running in Zahedan's streets, however, this intimate moment is also interrupted when the protagonist becomes conscious of her surrounding space and her body within this space as soon as she looks at the living room mirror.

In the above excerpt, the living room is the spatial frame of the narrative, followed by the description of a story space, namely the protagonist's imagined space of dancing passionately with an imaginary partner. Yet, once a physical element of the spatial frame, the mirror, in this case, re-asserts its presence, the account of story space is disturbed.

Quite curiously, one of the strategies that Lefebvre deploys to communicate his notion of the body/space relation, which is based on Lacanian theory of subjectivity formation, is the concept of a mirror and the reflection of the body in the mirror: "The mirror discloses the relationship between me and myself, my body and the consciousness of my body."[366] In other words, when the subject is confronted with his/her reflection in the mirror, it provides the person with a sense of unity in relation to her body and an understanding of the locality of the body and its surroundings. This reflection, however, is an abstraction. An "imaginary sphere which is yet quite real."[367] Hence, the mirror's reflection is "simultaneously unifying and fragmenting the relationship between the subject's image and its bodily content."[368]

In the same way, while the protagonist dances in the middle of the night, lost in her reverie, she conjures an idealized "Me" in an imaginative story space. Every element in her fantasy reflects a life that she yearns to obtain. In this illusory space, she is momentarily oblivious to the manners in which her body has been disciplined to negotiate her presence in space. The refabricated imagery consists of not only an idealized "Me" who can spontaneously and masterfully negotiate with her surroundings, but it also comprises another body, that of the imaginary partner who is sympathetic towards the protagonist. In the end, as mentioned above, immediately after the protagonist's confrontation with the mirror containing the double image of her actual body, the idealized "Me" evaporates. Therefore, when the protagonist becomes conscious that the image she has visualized in the

[366] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 185. For a more detailed comparison between Lefebvre and Lacan's theorization of subjectivity, especially in relation to space, see: Virginia Blum and Heidi Nast, "Where's the Difference? The Heterosexualization of Alterity in Henri Lefebvre and Jacques Lacan," Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 14, no. 5 (October 1996): 559–80.

[367] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 185.

[368] Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, Everyday Life and the Right to the City*, 1. issued in paperback, Nomikoi: Critical Legal Thinkers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 66.

story space is in little or no accordance with the reflection of herself in the mirror, the "fragmenting" aspect of the body/mirror reflection occurs.

The final sentence of the above excerpt, interestingly, can clue us in about how to explore how the public urban public space specifically affects the identity construction of the protagonist. Once the protagonist encounters her reflection in the mirror, she narrates: "I stare at this person who is lost, lost in that black starry sky."[369] The imagery of "black starry sky" in this sentence refers to the sky of Zahedan, the hometown of the protagonist; she uses this descriptive statement on two other occasions to express her contradictory feeling towards her hometown: "I told the therapist: it seems that I got lost many years ago, I got lost in that black starry sky of Zahedan."[370]

This exact sentence is repeated twice in the novel: first, it is stated in regard to the protagonist's yearning to be free-spirited like Gandom, unrestrained by the conventions of her hometown. The second time it is mentioned in a scene where the protagonist reveals her frustrations about not having contact with Gandom or, interpreting the excerpt based on the narrative logic of the novel, not being able to enact the "Me" that does not conform to notions of social propriety. In this respect, while the narrator faces continual bodily predicaments, which are induced by her years of living in the small hometown, she is unable to leave the city where she lived or this past self completely behind. Another instance which will help to clarify this matter occurs after the protagonist narrates the memory of running in Zahedan's street, when she again refers to her feelings about Zahedan:

> یک خیابان یا دو خیابان؟ کدام خیابان‌ها؟ اسم‌ها؟ چرا هیچ‌کدام از اسم‌ها یادم نیست؟ شهر من، شهر فراموش شده‌ی من. شهر تکه تکه‌شده‌ی من...
>
> One street or two streets? Which streets? Names? Why do I not remember any of the names? My city, my forgotten city. My fragmented city...[371]

In parallel with the character's fragmented self, as delineated in this passage, is the hometown city which is also shattered, forgotten, and on the edge of being obliterated in her mind. It is important to highlight that the identification with and constant allusions to her hometown do not imply a necessarily positive connotation, nor does it communicate a longing for Zahedan. As discussed in the third chapter, the narrator's animosity towards her hometown is illustrated in her refusal to visit the city after the sudden death of her twin brothers, believing that the tragedy has released her from her family obligations, cutting the last emotional tie with that space.

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[369] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 110.
[370] Ibid., 95 & 107.
[371] Ibid., 53.

The constraining public space of Zahedan and the spatial laws it imposed on her are foregrounded in the text as the point of disorientation for the character, since her body was forced to occupy space based on the rigid social decorum in Zahedan. Consequently, the protagonist, disconcerted by this societal control, created the imaginary double subject in order to cope with the consequences of not conforming to these spatially constraining standards. In other words, the public space of Zahedan is represented in the novel as the source that prompts the protagonist's adulthood corporeal (and identity) conflict. Therefore, the semantic space of the black starry sky of Zahedan, and the protagonist's emphasis that she has been lost in this ambiguous space further epitomizes the hometown as the origin of the character's internal conflict.

Subsequently, while establishing a new life in Tehran, the protagonist attempts to assuage the internal struggles in the relatively liberating urban space of the capital city. Yet, as stated briefly earlier, the protagonist encounters different challenges during her self-discovery journey in chaos-ridden Tehran, which is teeming with fights in the street, traffic jams, and agitated inhabitants. In the third chapter, I have elaborated on some of the urban stimuli that simultaneously motivate, irritate and liberate the protagonist as a *flâneuse*.

The fact that the fabric of the city incessantly influences the protagonist's self-reflexive journey creates, in itself, a quintessentially urban novel in which it is hard to separate the tale of the city from that of the main character. For example, urban displays, billboards, and banners, constantly assert their presence in the protagonist's observations, ushering the narrator, as a *flâneuse*, towards contemplating the urban history of Tehran, as they also evoke memories about the narrator's own life. Therefore, the protagonist's sense of self is in a steady dialectical relationship with the city.

Another well-deployed narratological strategy of the author to create the conjunction of self-city is illustrated as the author creates various thematic nets between the two. For example, as mentioned above, the protagonist's fragmented sense of self runs parallel to the fragmented city. So is the narrator's body, as another crucial thematic core of the novel, analogous to the cityscape. In this respect, the function of the city's displays in presenting the sociopolitical relation in Tehran is akin to how the protagonist's marks on her body remind her of unpleasant experiences. These two bruises, as was briefly stated at the beginning of this section, she refers to constantly, and continuously interrupt the course of the narrative. For instance, once the narrator is involved in a car accident, the first question that one of the other drivers asks is whether she has had another accident recently, referring to the bruise beneath her eye. The bewildered protagonist is not able to comprehend the driver's question, and when he points out her eyes, she tries to humorously dismiss the question: "I tell him: who doesn't have a black eye from time to time…we both laugh."[372]

[372] Ibid., 79.

It is important to note that the protagonist, on some occasions, slyly indicates that the bruises are caused by domestic violence, but she does not describe, nor does she explicitly narrate the episodes that have led to the injuries. The presence of the bruises, nevertheless, burrows into the traumas that the protagonist's body has endured.

The function of skin marks in literary texts is discussed extensively by Jay Prosser in his essay, Skin Memories, in which he argues that these types of bodily inscriptions can signify past traumatic experiences of characters. Prosser states that the marks serve as "skin biographies," arguing that they indicate enduring influences of distressing events. Even in some cases where the character is reluctant to remember past events, "skin autobiographies send messages from the unconscious to the surface of the body and the text."[373]

Likewise, the bruises on the protagonist's body in *Ehtemalan* function as a form of "skin biography." They are evocative clues that repeatedly call her to ruminate on her past life. While going about her everyday activities, the presence of these injuries reminds the character of a "memory as it is fictionalized and fabricated in the unconscious."[374] This is best captured in a paragraph at the beginning of the novel in which the leitmotif of the bruise drastically alters the thoughts of the protagonist:

> می‌خواهم از توالت بیایم بیرون که صورتم را توی آینه می‌بینم. می‌نشینم روی توالت و صورتم را بین دست‌هام قایم می‌کنم. تازه یاد نگاه و حرف‌های امروز صبح سامیار می‌افتم. می‌خواستم بداند چرا پشت چشمم اینجور شده.
>
> دکتر پرسید: «چند وقت است با گندم به هم زدی؟
>
> گفتم: «هشت سال.»
>
> I want to leave the bathroom, but I see my face in the mirror. I sit on the toilet and hide my face in my hands. I just remember Samyar's looks this morning. He wanted to know why my eye looked like this. The therapist asked: how long ago did you break ties with Gandom?
>
> I said: eight years.[375]

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist implicitly indicates that the bruises are caused by domestic violence. Given the complicated relationship that the narrator has with her body, this aspect of being the victim of domestic violence increases the narrator's bodily struggles. As such, in the above passage, the protag-

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[373] Jay Prosser, "Skin Memories," in *Thinking through the Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (New York: Routledge, 2001), 64

[374] Ibid., 67.

[375] Salar, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am*, 9; other occasions in which these bruises are questioned by the other characters, 19 & 102.

onist suddenly notices the bruise and becomes unsettled. The following paragraph, which is relatively short and consists of only two sentences, is a recollection narrating a recent therapy session during which the narrator talks about Gandom. The subsequent paragraph, interestingly, resumes narrating the rest of the protagonist's everyday life. We can see that the presence of the bruise only interrupts the course of the narrative momentarily, since the narrator abruptly remembers a few seconds of her therapy session. The mark on her body, in this respect, reminds her of the trauma that her body has endured in different stages of her life. Accordingly, these body marks frequently interrupt the narrator's everyday routines, as they register the memory of the traumatic events. This process also suggests the character's inability to cope with the consequences of her bodily traumas, because every time that she sees the bruises, she is overwhelmed by them: the routine of her everyday life and her contemplations are interrupted, and she describes a feeling or an event which is related to her unpleasant embodied experiences.

As thoroughly discussed in the third chapter, urban billboards play a vital role in the narrative. The narrator frequently refers to them, describes their content, or at times, critically relates them to the sociopolitical context of the city. In this respect, if the city's body signals its turbulent urban history to the *flâneuse*, the marks on the protagonist's body function as a skin biography to remind her of her unattended wounds of the past. Therefore, the border between the protagonist and the city, again, becomes blurred: the city is fragmented, and so is the protagonist; the city marks usher towards urban history, as do the marks on the protagonist's body.

In the constant overlap and intersection of the three main themes of the novel— space, body, and identity— Tehran is as confining as it is redeeming. Although the protagonist does not necessarily identify, like the characters of *Natamami*, as a *Shahrestani* girl in the capital city, she does express on several occasions that her goal since moving to Tehran, has been to remain in the city and never return to her hometown. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, Tehran's urban environment in the novel is portrayed with an intrinsically capricious nature. The unreliability of Tehran—the physical environment as well as the social atmosphere—is constantly repeated and underlined in the narrative. One example is mentioned in the third chapter: the *flâneurial* observations of the protagonist foreground the unpredictable nature of the city by expressing the narrator's fear that the high-rise buildings of Tehran might collapse at any given moment.

Quite interestingly, in another instance, the above topic is underpinned by the collective anxiety of *Tehrani*an citizens regarding an imminent earthquake. In this example, the narrator is agitated because she is stuck in a very slow-moving traffic jam, and she suddenly visualizes a terrifying earthquake:

آخ، مجبور می‌شوم بایستم. مرده‌شورش را ببرند. به نوارهای آهنی زیر پل نگاه می‌کنم، به آن همه بتن و خرت و پرت دیگر، و دوباره این فکر که اگر همین الان زلزله بیاید احتمالا این پل...یک‌دفعه یادم می‌آید که فقط پل نیست، آن همه ماشین روش هم هست. ناخودآگاه می‌خوانم: بسم الله الرحمان الرحیم،[...].

Ah, I have to stop. Damn it. I look at the iron strips under the bridge, at all the concrete and all the other rubble, and again the thought that if there is an earthquake right now, this bridge will probably [collapse]...I suddenly remember that it is not just the bridge but also all the cars on it. Instinctively I murmur: In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful...[376]

As extensively elaborated in the examination of Mohebb'ali's *Negran nabash*, the fear of a potential earthquake has a dominating presence in the urban discourse of Tehran. In the above excerpt, the narrator's distressing emotions are made clear by the fact that she does not even trust the city's concrete façade, although it is an exceptionally stable physical material, to withstand the impending seismic catastrophe. Furthermore, the constant references that the protagonist makes to the city and its unpredictable nature metaphorically mirror her incoherent sense of self.

The public space of Tehran is, nevertheless, where the protagonist's quest to recreate her identity and to form a more coherent "Me" takes place, and where eventually, her inner conflict is, as we see at the end of the novel, resolved. By the end of the story, as briefly discussed in the third chapter, the protagonist meets with her former love interest, a former anarchist classmate and accomplished present-day journalist, Farid Dehdar. His assertion that Gandom is, in fact, the narrator —he calls her Gandom as soon as he meets her at his office—prompts the protagonist to validate her own rebellious years and accept this part of her personality. Intriguingly, the role that the urban setting plays is emphasized in her description of her euphoric experience after meeting Farid Dehdar:

پام که به خیابان می‌رسد، احساس می‌کنم یک چیزی که شاید بهش می‌گویند نشئگی، با یک چیز دیگری که شاید بهش می‌گویند کرختی، با یک چیز دیگری که شاید بهش می‌گویند رهایی، از نوک انگشت‌های پام به هم می‌پیچند و بالا می‌آیند[...]می‌روم آن‌طرف خیابان، همان‌جا کنار ماشین می‌ایستم و می‌گذارم تا قطره‌های درشت بارانی که یک‌هو شروع کرده‌اند به باریدن مثل آن وقتی که فرو می‌روند توی خاک، فرو بروند توی من.

As soon as my foot lands on the pavement of the street, I feel something that might be called stupor, along with something else that might be called numbness, along with something else that might be called emancipation, I feel it twist and rise from the tips of my toes]...[I cross the street, stand by the car and let the large raindrops, which have suddenly started to fall, sink into me, just like they sink into the ground.[377]

[376] Ibid., 15.
[377] Ibid., 141.

The above paragraph, loaded with symbolic motifs such as penetrating rain, describes the protagonist's state of tranquility; it is the first time that the narrator's emotional state of mind while occupying a spatial frame is bereft of any tension and torment and she is entirely at ease. More significantly, the protagonist underlines that the blissful moment commences precisely as she finds herself on the street, and she yearns to linger on and stay in this space, letting the rain sink into her body. The role of the city in this particular paragraph is even more apparent as the sudden rain is evocative of an earlier narrated scene in which the protagonist refers to her feeling about Tehran's rain: "When it rains, dirty Tehran is beautiful. When it rains, crowded Tehran is beautiful. When it trains, ramshackle Tehran is…"[378]

In this respect, the protagonist's quest to be introspective about her identity starts in and ends with the city, and as such, the character's metaphoric rebirth is also characterized by the nexus of self-body-city. It is only in a particular environment (the spatial frame of the city in the rain) and by feeling a sense of acceptance flowing through her body that the protagonist's identity-based conflict is resolved.

In the concluding section, I offer a summary of the discussions presented above, and I expand on the similarities and distinctive approaches used by the authors of these novels as they reflect on the spatial dimension of their characters' identity process.

Final Discussion

As illustrated in this chapter, *Az sheytan* and *Ehtemalan's* protagonists negotiate their identities in relation to their surrounding spaces in a distinctive manner, and as they develop their spatial maps of the city, their focalizing points of view also vary in many ways. There are, however, notable similarities between the two characters' urban experiences and how their quest for constructing a more coherent identity is represented in the novels.

In terms of the similarities, the most salient one is that both characters adopt a reflective perspective on their past selves and their past experiences throughout the entirety of the narrative: the protagonist of *Az sheytan* accomplishes this through her diligent diary writing, and the narrator of *Ehtemalan* does it through her constant introspective internal dialogues with herself. These protagonists persistently review, re-examine, and re-evaluate memories of their everyday, seemingly inconsequential, previous life events. One of the most significant and recurrent elements of these memories is the spatial component of their experiences. The character in *Az sheytan* seeks to cope with the major distressing experience of homelessness by reminding herself of her past spatial relations and the places where her sense of belonging has been satisfied. The narrator of *Ehtemalan* traces the memories of her younger (and unconstrained) self in the city to construct an integrative "Me." In other words, although through different

[378] Ibid., 58–59.

means, both characters deal with their identity conflict by means of a self-therapeutic process.

Additionally, the novels' protagonists have ambivalent feelings regarding some of the socially-recognized aspects of their identity. They both, for instance, find it challenging to deal with the inexhaustible societal expectations of motherhood: the diarist of *Az sheytan* constantly blames herself for not being able to attend to her son, and the protagonist of *Ehtemalan*, who has deeper conflicting emotions towards the role due to her family history, constantly oscillates between her love for her son and her apprehension about the ascribed obligation of being a mother.

Another resemblance in both novels is the sense of belonging to the spatial surroundings that is introduced as a priori in the process of identity formation. The protagonist of *Az sheytan* considers herself a destitute and insecure person, predominantly because she does not have any definite space where she can live securely. The narrator of Salar's novel also constantly contemplates her childhood hometown and the ways in which the socio-spatial constraints have affected her current identity struggles as an adult.

Regarding the dissimilarities between the two characters, an important point is that the protagonist of *Ehtemalan* is a peripatetic urban wanderer, a *flâneuse*. The character's quest for identity is narratively motivated by her sensible, conscious, and constant efforts to wander around and observe the city. The character's constant urban wanderings are coupled with her mind-wanderings; as she searches the city, she simultaneously is piecing together fragments of her identity. Significantly, except for a few passages in which she is at home or a restaurant, the entire narrative takes place in the streets of the city. The unnamed protagonist/*flâneuse*, holds Tehran close, although she is aware of the predicaments of being a *flâneuse* in the city, as was discussed in the third chapter. In this respect, the diarist of *Az sheytan's* relationship with the city is represented through how she describes her emotional state by using urban allegories. The urban-related themes are an ever-present element in her practice of diary writing, as exemplified in her recurrent comparison between herself and the Ekbatan complex.

Another dissimilarity concerns the characters' different socioeconomic strata. Although Volga, the protagonist of Aqaʾi's novel, repeatedly emphasizes her affluent past, the narrative mainly covers her days of homelessness. By contrast, the protagonist of *Ehtemalan*, due to her marriage to a businessman, is financially stable. Accordingly, their urban adventures, the city-dwellers that they encounter, and the general trajectory of their urban experiences are totally different. In her diary, Volga writes about other cities' homeless inhabitants and marginalized people. The protagonist of *Ehtemalan* suffers from other struggles, yet her position in the city, compared to Volga's, is essentially privileged. She has the advantage, and the liberty, to wander around the city and reflect on her life. As a result, her tour around the city is an introspective and individual quest through which the narrative delineates a psycho-geographic map of the city.

In this respect, Salar brings forward the entanglements of body and space, exploring how the surrounding space has affected the protagonist's somatic struggles and how this process enables and/or disturbs the protagonist's sense of identity. The narrative of *Az sheytan*, conversely, has a sustained focus on the two themes of identity and space, revealing how the protagonist's association with non-places degrades her sense of self. As such, the public space of Tehran, in *Az sheytan*, is ontologically contradictory; it provides shelter and yet also harbors crime; it provides opportunities but then rips them away in an instant; it gives hope, and immediately afterward leaves the protagonist helpless.

In conclusion, as discussed, the urban sensibility, the background, and the observations of the two characters are distinctly different. Yet, in their arduous search to construct a coherent "Me," the urban space of Tehran is outlined as a locus of possibility and transformation. Akin to the other protagonists of the previous novels examined in this study, Tehran is not necessarily depicted as a welcoming and pleasant environment. The capital city, however, as spatially contingent as it is, provides the opportunity for the characters to venture and experience, to fail and succeed, and to negotiate and recreate their identities after significant unfortunate events of their past.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze how Iranian female authors' fictional narratives are influenced by the characteristics of Tehran's urban space. Assessing different features that shape the literary representation of Tehran, my arguments are based on three main theoretical frameworks; the figure of the *flâneur/flâneuse*, the concept of the Right to the City, and the relationship between identity formation and narrative space. Although thematically diverse, these conceptual approaches established in this study are linked together by underlying social forces as well as the political dynamics of Tehran's urban space.

Not only does urban geography play a vital role in the writing of female authors, but the human connection these women have to this geography is a primary narrative force that constantly affects the characters' states of mind. In the four novels examined in this book, characters are in constant negotiation with their surroundings, whose components are inextricable from the central conflicts of the stories. However, this issue does not mean that protagonists can construct a harmonious relationship with the city; on the contrary, Tehran is fraught with hurdles and conflict, teeming with gender-related struggles as well as heightened repression of inhabitants. Female writing of the city, nevertheless, reflects the ways in which women make sense of their urban lives and how they challenge the status quo. In this respect, although restrictive sociopolitical conventions affect women's urban experience, they purposefully assert their presence in the city. This constant struggle, however, leads to an ambivalent relationship to Tehran; the city opens up possibilities, yet it also extends ever-present barriers. The bilateral aspect of the female urban experience, which, in itself, is engendered by cultural dynamics, social norms, and political agenda, is an integral part of the discussions in this study.

The urban wanderings of the *Tehrani*an *flâneuse*, as delineated in two novels of *Ehtemalan gom shodeh ʾam* and *Negaran nabash*, are emblematic of an essentially female understanding of the city, as the figure frequently needs to deal with gendered assumptions about herself while walking in the city. Regarding the *flâneuse*'s obstacles in the city, the discussions of the novels suggested that both protagonists had to deal with constant interferences of other inhabitants. Even in the case of *Negaran nabash*, in which the entire story takes place in an anomic earthquake-stricken Tehran that is unregulated, the *flâneuse*'s sheer presence in the city entices the voyeuristic gaze of city inhabitants. Similarly, in the ordinary Tehran of *Ehtemalan*, which is not affected by the aftermath of an earthquake, the protagonist is forced to encounter the unwanted gaze that is directed at her. The main characters of these two novels are alienated urban figures whose social detachment and curiosity about their cities construct their *flâneurial* journeys. Their gendered body turns them into hyper-visible figures, as their movements are under

the scrutiny of other inhabitants of the city, yet their spatial resolutions eventually surpass these restrictions.

The *flâneuse* of *Negaran nabash*, Shadi, is an outcast, not fitting into social norms and stigmatized due to her addiction. Her outward appearance bespeaks her marginality, as she disguises herself in gender-neutral clothing, leaving other city dwellers confused about her identity. She walks into the city to look for her next fix, but she uses every opportunity to stop, observe, and report the urban spectacle, which, given the aftermath of the earthquake, is particularly tumultuous. Her inevitable solitude has led her to become a *flâneuse*, as her only long-lasting companion throughout the narrative is a dog. Shadi has great affection for the dog, which signifies her seclusion but also her longing for connection.

Mohebbʿali's protagonist, however, profoundly enjoys her *flâneurial* experience; she accompanies her reports of the city with fitting songs she chooses from her MP3 playlist, offering a multilayered account of the city filtered through her aesthetic preferences. As such, her account of the city is exceptionally detailed and personal.

Similarly, the *flâneuse* of *Ehtemalan* offers her own distinct reading of the city and her account is even more influenced by personal dilemmas. Her past traumas trouble her, especially those that developed as her body was being disciplined with the traditional values of society during her childhood. She observes the city while she is driving in order to partially distance herself from the urban environment and to become an auto-*flâneuse*. Her reports of the city, therefore, are distinctive in the sense that they detail the city's visual hyperactivity: the commercial billboards, street signs, and propaganda-filled banners. The protagonist's memories are frequently enmeshed in her *flâneurial* reports, and her narration flits between her mental map and Tehran's urban topography.

Furthermore, the *flâneuse*'s roaming in the city is motivated by her former spatial associations, since she aims to visit the places she once occupied. She wanders Tehran in the company of a shadow of her former self, contemplating the past and present of the city as well as the past and present versions of herself. While visiting her old dormitory in the city center, for instance, she is abruptly thrust into the memories of wartime Tehran and reveals that the ramifications of the war still affect the city.

Significantly, both protagonists are caught in a city governed by rigid socio-spatial control and containing an agitated urban populace on the verge of revolt at any given moment. The *flâneuse* of *Negaran nabash* witnesses, albeit momentarily, the cathartic chaos of Tehran engendered by the earthquake, and the *flâneuse* of Salar's novel, who experiences a seemingly ordinary Tehran, frequently refers to the unpredictability of the city. Both figures are sensitive to this sociopolitical aspect, yet *Negaran nabash*'s narrative notably offers a meditation on urban politics through an imaginary chronicle of an unrestrained Tehran. In this respect, the *flâneuse* documents disputes, demands, and concerns of the city-dwellers who have descended into the streets to express their dissatisfaction. Because of this, the novel documents a momentous time in the contested city space of

Tehran, exploring what kinds of rights different groups of *Tehrani*an citizens demand from their city, what they have been deprived of, and how they demonstrate their objections.

As previously stated, the protagonist of *Negaran nabash* has been ostracized by society, yet she is not the only marginalized character depicted in the novel. The author presents a gallery of misfit characters who have been excluded and rejected due to societal norms and political issues. The novel provides a discourse on the Lefebvrian concept of the Right to the City, unraveling the dynamics of urban inequality and its consequences. The author predominantly focuses on the younger generation born in the 90s, whose goal is to radically reclaim Tehran and reorganize it based on their values, morals, and meanings.

In this context of anarchy, city dwellers come into conflict with each other, generational differences give rise to hostile interactions, and violence prevails in the city. Nevertheless, as the *flâneuse* of the novel declares, the public drama unfolding on the streets is due to the longevity of the urban restrictions in place; for many years, the city inhabitants have not been able to use the public space in the ways that they wanted. Accordingly, these communities of inhabitants are introduced in the novel as the less-advantaged group. This disaffected mass has come to the streets to express their frustration in regard to the marginalization they have experienced. The narrativized Tehran of *Negaran nabash*, therefore, integrates accounts of the socially excluded, offering a blueprint of the possible city. This Tehran is terrifyingly anarchic but is nonetheless a glimpse of an alternative of the current city: a city in which the public space is accessible to urban outsiders, where politically diverse ideas are included in the urban discourse, and where *flâneuse*s are granted the freedom of gaze.

The dynamics of the urban conflict are also explored, albeit predominantly from a societal perspective, in Zahra ʻAbdi's *Natamami*. The narrative follows the protagonist, a young student with provincial roots struggling to navigate her life in the capital city. The character frequently refers to the discriminatory behaviors of other citizens who consider themselves real *Tehrani*s. The dichotomy of *Shahrestani*/*Tehrani* and its subsequent challenges results in the protagonist feeling ambivalent toward the city, yet she assertively aims to remain there and lay her claim on the opportunities in the urban environment of Tehran.

The author, furthermore, approaches Tehran as a surveilled city where city inhabitants are under authoritative scrutiny. The government's usage of video surveillance has resulted in a policed and regulated public space. This excessive surveillance of the lifestyle of inhabitants, especially the young generation, is addressed in the novel through the oppositional urban rhetoric of the ruling power and its citizens, as each group intends to reappropriate the public space of the city based on their own ideals. The author brings into sharper focus a teenage girl from the marginalized gypsy community of Tehran and traces her journey in the city. She is inured in hardships and is constantly subjected to abuse and violence. Yet, in one of the deserted urban alleys, she discovers her female desire for the

first time and the urge to explore her body. Although the narrative depicts Tehran as a highly surveilled city, it also introduces it as the locus of inhabitants' fantasies, desires, and erotic encounters.

The thematization of urban space in the selected narratives is generally, in one way or another, related to or influenced by the characters' self-conception. In other words, as formerly discussed, the protagonists frequently put themselves into dialogue with the city, and their personal lives, on many occasions, parallel what is happening in the urban environment. This issue is specifically salient in the two novels analyzed in the fifth chapter of the book, *Ehetemalan* and *Az sheytan*. The border between mental and physical space in these stories is often blurred, as the characters' psychological states mirror the transformation of the city and vice versa. The protagonists' memories are influenced by the space they formerly occupied and their lasting effects on their psyche. The characters' process of identity formation, as such, develops through their persistent efforts to come to terms with their spatial struggles of the past and to construct a more integrated relationship with their surroundings.

Sara Salar's novel, *Ehtemalan*, addresses the interrelatedness between identity, city, and body, examining how the protagonist's process of identity formation and transformation is informed by the other two components. The character's identity struggle is particularly reflected in her split personality; she creates an imaginary friend in her adolescence to endure mistreatment by her parents. She becomes accustomed to attributing her unconventional and transgressive behavior to this imaginary friend.

Interestingly, the city, as is the case with other novels, is also introduced in *Ehtemalan* as a disorderly and turbulent environment, yet, it is in the city and through the constant contemplations of the protagonist that her identity conflict is, to great effect, resolved. Throughout this process, the character continues her *flâneurial* observations, which are essential in her journey of self-discovery. As such, she describes, considers, and expands on various aspects of urban scenery to reflect on her state of mind, presenting a psycho-geographic map of Tehran marked by her memories.

The relationship between self and city in *Az sheytan*, the last novel analyzed in this study, is seen through the absence of a definite space. In other words, due to a series of unfortunate events, the novel's protagonist becomes homeless. Because of this, she is forced to occupy non-places; she sleeps on the streets, at parks, or in public libraries. Her social decline incessantly unnerves the protagonist insomuch as she rejects her current reality and instead becomes engaged in avidly ruminating over the spaces she has formerly occupied, the beautiful cities she has traveled to, or the luxurious hotels she has visited.

A traumatic event, however, changes the course of the story: she is raped in one of her temporary shelters. In the aftermath of the trauma, the protagonist walks the streets of Tehran with her violated body seeking justice, an effort which turns out to be futile given the discriminatory Iranian legal system. Being able to wonder and wander the city, nevertheless, helps the protagonist to come to terms

with the shocking event; through the city signs, she is reminded of other victims of sexual abuse, and therefore feels less isolated and positions her suffering within the shared narrative of sexual violence. Once again, the narrative delineates the city with its brutal and simultaneously healing nature.

The novels studied in this book disclose an intricate relationship between the city and its female inhabitants. The narratives problematize Tehran's gender-based restrictions, conservative attitudes, and unsafe urban environment. Nevertheless, the stories' protagonists are depicted as determined women, venturing out into the city to exercise and assert their female agency and to resist being objectified and controlled. As portrayed in the novels, Tehran is definitely not a city with a pleasant façade, but it is a city where possibilities are presented to female characters. Women experience the city amidst this complex nexus of socio-political and cultural struggles; they despise Tehran and embrace it simultaneously.

Ehtemalan's protagonist, on one occasion, declares that Tehran comes to be beautiful and tolerable when it rains. Correspondingly, the joyful spiritual moment when she overcomes her identity crisis by the end of the novel occurs precisely as the first splatters of rain wash over her body and the city. Quite curiously, a similar sentiment is expressed by the protagonist of one of Mahshid Amirshahi's stories: "when it snows, I like Tehran. The city becomes satisfying and pleasant [...] many places that one doesn't want to see would also be hidden under the snow."[379]

Amirshahi's novel was published in 1971, years before the revolution, in a completely different spatiotemporal context. Nevertheless, the thematic thread connecting the two is that the characters are ambivalent regarding their feelings about Tehran; in order for them to unconditionally desire the city, something must be changed in the current urban environment. The characters express that this change might occur if the city is cleansed with snow or rain. This wish, accordingly, alludes to a relatively abstract semantic tension between the characters' dissatisfaction with the city as it is now and their desire for an alternative city. But what should change in the city to create the desired urban environment these characters are after? Are these goals related to social inclusion, as the protagonist of *Natamami* longed for? Or are they related to the *flâneuse*'s ultimate desire to be emancipated, as the characters of *Negaran nabash* and *Ehtemalan* called for? Or do these aspirations stem from the characters' personal struggles, as they aim to construct their identities and individuality in an ever-changing urban environment, as the protagonist of *Az sheytan* attempted to do?

As the discussions in this study demonstrated, all of these questions and concerns are pertinent to understand how female authors approach different aspects of urban spaces. This study is, however, as indicated in the introductory chapter, a glimpse of Tehran as conceived by the female authors whose works are

[379] Mahshid Amirshahi, "Paikan Place," in *Be sigheh-ye avval shakhs-e mofrad* (Tehran: Buf, 1971), 83.

featured here. Given recent social transformations and political upheavals, not only Tehran but other Iranian cities have become a battleground of contested meanings and values, a complex spiral of mayhem whose debut point is essentially related to and induced by urban inequality and exclusion. There is, therefore, abundant room for future studies investigating the fictional representations of urban power relations in Iran, exploring whether the authors' urban tales are a diagnostic contemplation of the present-day condition of cities, or rather a prefiguration, disclosing their desire for an alternative urban reality. In any case, examining how the work of Iranian storytellers (writers, poets, filmmakers, and artists) is influenced by the cities that they write in and about can reveal invaluable insights into the spatialization of the sociopolitical conflicts in the country.

The lettered city, whether it documents the current tensions in an urban environment or depicts a phantasmagoria of the city yet to be formed, is nevertheless a collection of writerly voices of urbanites, piecing together a city, reflecting the accounts of those excluded and those whose hardships are forgotten within the chaos of ever-changing cities.

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This research investigates how the urban landscape of Tehran shapes the narratives of Iranian female authors, highlighting the intricate connections between gender, identity, and spatial dynamics. This study focuses on Tehran to provide a deeper understanding of its role as Iran's political and cultural center. By examining four key novels—*Negaran nabash* by Mahsa Moheb'ali, *Ehtemalan gom shodeh'am* by Sara Salar, Natamami by Zahra 'Abdi, and *Az sheytan amukht va suzand* by Farkhondeh Aqa'i—this research addresses a significant gap in Iranian scholarship concerning the depiction of urban environments in works by female writers.

Applying theoretical frameworks such as the concepts of the *flâneuse,* the Right to the City, and identity formation through narrative space, the research illustrates how the urban context profoundly impacts the experiences of female characters. The findings reveal that, while Tehran presents numerous challenges and gender-based obstacles, it also serves as a vital arena for women to express their identities and resist traditional societal constraints. This duality creates a complex relationship between female characters and their urban environment, characterized by both confinement and empowerment.

Ultimately, this study provides new insights into the gendered experiences in Iranian urban literature, revealing how female authors navigate and express both their challenges and sense of agency within Tehran's shifting sociopolitical landscape.

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