Feminism and Tribalism in Simtat Hashkediyot Be'oumrijan

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In a 2001 interview with the Sunday British Times, Israeli author Dorit Rabinyan spoke of the state of mind that led her, and other second generation Mizrachi writers, to write about the Arab, eastern culture of her parents and grandparents:

> The collective Israeli consciousness, which was the cornerstone of the foundation of the Zionist state of 53 years ago, and which bound the immigrants from all parts of the world into a people, into a nation, is no longer our consciousness. This is the archaic, too idealistic outlook on the life of our parents that arouses in us a concealed snigger at the Sabbath-eve family dinners. According to it, the individual has to sacrifice his own good, his freedom, his life, for the common good. This outlook has not succeeded in upgrading itself to a modern, sophisticated version (Rabinyan 2001).

Persian Brides, Rabinyan's first novel, is the story of fifteen-year-old Flora and her eleven-year-old cousin Nazie. Set in the Jewish quarter of the Persian fictional village of Oumrijan (a few hundred kilometres north of Teheran) in the early years of the 20th century, it covers two days in the life of the two young women. At the same time, the novel narrates the parallel tale of their superstitious family and the ignorant residents of the bewitching Persian Jewish quarter. The episodic, hyper-real, yet at times surrealistic book, straddles twin plot lines: one deals with Flora's search for her wayward husband who has impregnated her and left, the other with her cousin Nazie's desperate measures to secure the necessary consent to marry the man she has been promised to. In between, Rabinyan fills her book with a series of anecdotes, each with its galaxy of colourful secondary characters, sexual intrigues, smells, sounds, local mythology, dishes and rituals. In an intensely visual and digressive fashion, she engineers a folkloristic plot bristling with crystalline detail.

The meticulous recreation of the Jewish village is evoked in a passage in which one of the protagonists and his apprentice ride on their donkey into the Iranian town:

> … by the wide itinerants' gate in the northern side of the village wall through which the merchant caravans came and went. They left through the southern gate, *darvazeh jaudan,* close to the crowded Jewish quarter, the Jubareh…No sooner did they pass through the gate that they were hit by the stench of the village, their breath grew short, and a dizzy spell made them lose their balance and fall…The sweet scent of the flowering almond trees filled their nostrils. The dense almond copse enveloped the Jews' neighbourhood, screening it from the other quarters as its alleys wound among the trees. It did not protect the inhabitants like the fortified stone wall that surrounded the Armenian quarter…(*Persian Brides* 55-56).

Without in the least abandoning the task of broadening and deepening the search for self in the world of her Persian brides, an audible element in the raison d'être of the text is ancestral continuation. For Rabinyan, who remembers her Persian parents speaking with a religious reverence of their home, the re-imagining of this half-lit universe and the people who live in its shadows was the outcome of an overflow on the sandy shores of emotion. It is evident that

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the Israeli journalist and scriptwriter, who was only 22 when the novel was published, felt very close blood ties with her ethnic past:

> For me it is very sentimental, this other place…When my parents talk about the place they came from, about Isphaha, they always close their eyes and say, "Asphan, Asphan, the most beautiful city in the world". And without wanting, the imagination goes further afield…But there is no desire to tell the story of the ethnic group. I am not a messenger for any group. This is the story of my grandmother which for years circulated around our family and at some stage fascinated me. I investigated it and wanted to tell it…Even though I am not writing about the "Here and now" I belong no less to that place and time than those before me who wrote about the east. I write about another reality because I think it is very difficult to write about what is happening here, because it is changing so much. It is easier to write about what has taken place a long time ago. The "Here and now" are still a little meaningless (Green 1995).

One thread of the main plot concerns the spoiled and voluptuous Flora Ratoryan, a fifteen-year-old bride who falls pregnant on her wedding night to Shachin, an itinerant and vagrant cloth merchant who abandons his new wife after promising to return quickly from one of his silk-making journeys. Shachin had entered Flora's life just at the right time, for in the community of Oumrijan unmarried teenage girls are regarded as old maids. It is no wonder then that the villagers began speculating that at fifteen, the single Flora was destined for spinsterhood. Previously, she had rejected Morteza Kachalu, the richest suitor in the village, carefully chosen by her parents, who seemed like the perfect groom, gently caressing Flora's hair on a nightly walk and later sending trays of fruit to sweeten her day until his return to ask for her hand. Flora, in turn, insulted his honour by distributing the baskets of food to the crowd of porters and hungry beggars standing outside the Ratoryan house (*Persian Brides* 183-185).

Inheriting the travelling cloth-making business from his father, Shachin, not a particularly talented trader, had adopted a crafty technique of salesmanship—first seducing those women who opened their doors to view his rolls of colourful garments and then blackmailing them. His ruse involved sleeping with the vain Shiite housewives who let him inside to view the textiles, and presenting them with a gift of material as a reward for their charms. At night, he would return, confront the unwitting husband with the news that his wife had purchased rolls for a dress and ask for an excessive payment. He would watch the tearful customer beg her husband to accede to the peddler's demand so as to rid the house of his presence (*Persian Brides* 53-55).

Midway through the narrative, the unscrupulous Shachin rides into the village of Oumrijan and into the arms of the teenage Flora, who has spurned her parents' chosen groom. As soon as he knocks on the Ratoryan family's door, Shachin is pulled in by the forlorn Miriam Chanoum, who after having her fears allayed by Azizolla the fortune-teller, agrees to the match (*Persian Brides* 57-60). Lamentably missing is any psychological perspicuity to explicate Flora's and Miriam's almost instant fascination with Shachin. After all, Flora rebuffed Morteza Kachalu's advances chiefly because of his baldness. Yet Shachin is described as having a, "sun freckled, fungus-infected bald patch…bays in his hair…ringworm scars on his balding pate" with thinning hair and a weak eye, framed by an "ugly face" (*Persian Brides* 57, 198).

While waiting for the errant peddler, the pining Flora becomes larger and larger. She devours large amounts of food to sooth her aching heart and attempts all manners of spells to entice Shachin back. On the advice of her great aunts, she urinates on a hen's egg, burns crackling seeds on a censer, yawns deeply, and finally is told to sing the sad song of Guslistan (*Persian Brides* 15). Longing and aching for her vagrant man, Flora,

> …hauled her heavy body to the roof of her parents' house, spread a straw mat under the laundry line, taut as the dome of the heaven, chased the birds skyward, and sang Gulistan's song loudly and devotedly from dawn to dusk. In the first days her voice was full of passion...Only when her voice had grown hoarse and all but vanished, and the neighbours complained to her abashed parents about the noise she was making, and threatened to throw her from the roof into the garden, did Flora agree to come down and lament in the sooty kitchen (*Persian Brides* 17-18).

Despite her efforts, the broken-hearted Flora fails to retrieve her shifty and treacherous husband. As a response, she makes a last ditch attempt to reclaim him. Sneaking out of the house, she heads off on foot, out of Oumrijan for the first time, to the town of Babol-Sar, where the couple had spent their honeymoon. There she discovers that Shachin has married Lily, a wealthy Baha'i woman, and impregnated her. However, as he explains to Flora, he did so only in order to get his hands on her pearls and diamonds. In the end, Flora's glimmer of hope is shattered when the deceiving Shachin leads her to his bed only to taunt her by copulating with Lily. Wrecked by his betrayal, Flora flees the room and jumps out of the balcony window to her death (*Persian Brides* 202-210).

The second nub of the narrative focuses on Flora's eleven-year-old cousin Nazie. An orphan, she was one of the few children to survive the smallpox epidemic to become the resolute and determined household caretaker for Miriam Chanoum (one of her father's relatives). The strong-willed Nazie is desperate to mature, for she dreams of marrying Flora's brother Moussa, to whom she was betrothed at birth. Yet she is unable to do so as the Shah's laws proscribe marriage before the age of twelve, unless there is genuine evidence of puberty, such as a period. The tiny Nazie, the antithesis of the amply endowed Flora, prays and casts spells to quicken her first period and to grow breasts, frantic to become a woman and reach marriageable age.

Indeed, much is made of a girl's menstruation. Thus, when Flora's father is told of his daughter's first period by his wife, he proudly hauls himself to the roof. There, he disseminates the news of his daughter's availability to all the matchmakers of the surrounding villages, dispatching ten carrier pigeons. Consequently, the Ratoryan home bristles with interested suitors who join the family for a meal and a bout of hashish smoking while examining their prospective spouse (*Persian Brides* 179-189).

Although she fails to achieve menstruation, the feisty Nazie does not give in to the laws that were designed by the ruling Shah to protect pre-pubescent girls from early pregnancy and death at childbirth. The impatient Nazie sets off to the Mosque, wearing Flora's wedding dress. There, she pleads with Mullah Ja'afar to declare that she is physically ready for marriage, claiming that her frail body and delicate bones are no hindrance. In accordance with the Shah's proclamation, the sympathetic, but honest Mullah, refuses to give Nazie his permission.

In a culture that indoctrinates young girls to believe that early marriage is the only path, and that female identity is defined by a wedding day and the ability to conceive, Nazie's perseverance and doggedness come to the fore. In a telling scene, she defies the mullah's ruling, forcing him to finally relent:

> Nazie grabbed the fishes and tugged hard. The hooks of the earrings, which Miriam Chanoum had sneaked into the holes years before, cut through the lobes and split them in half. The blood gushed from the flesh and spurted merrily, as though it had been waiting for this moment. The ears competed with one another in spurting as much blood as they could on the big wedding gown. Nazie's face twitched with pain, and she saw great gouts falling on the carpet…The men who had seized her arms to drag her outside were shocked and let go. Nazie put the wet earrings in the hand of the *mullah*, who had come up to her in astonishment, and closed is fingers on them. His jaw dropped in alarm, his eyes bulged, and now finally Nazie looked straight at them and asked that in return for the earrings he would grant her wish and allow her to marry her cousin Moussa (*Persian Brides* 163-164).

At heart, Nazie's brave act of revolt against the local edicts points out an important tension, contrasting the values and priorities of Persian and modern culture. Rabinyan sermonises openly about the moral character of a society that programs its adolescents with a fervent wish to enter the confines of marriage. Without over-dwelling on the protagonists' interior thoughts, Rabinyan strikes gold by brilliantly orienting the reader to sense the anxiety and suffering of Nazie and Flora, employing a type of literary pedagogy that creates a real eye opener. Inevitably, Rabinyan's effort in structuring and focusing her story on the authentic experiences of the two women, presenting a heightened perspective through a blend of detailed images, actions and shared customs, seduces the reader to move from the safety of the tale's edge into its centre and to become an active participant. Surprisingly, there is little intrusion, explicit or implied, on the part of the omniscient narrator, making no moral condemnation of any kind.

As Batya Gur has observed, the spectator may repress his agony, as the Mullah does, at Nazie's voracity to jettison her child status and her almost primal passion to become fertile and tender like her cousin Flora. The reason for this, Gur asserts, is that we know that the fire of rebellion burning in her belly will soon be extinguished by the toils of marriage, housekeeping and submission to an overbearing and violent husband (Gur 1993). With its unblinking portrayal of the savage ill will men display towards their wives, the novel does bring to light the muted cry of pain of the women, filling the pages with a sense of loss.

Towards the end of the novel, in a rare moment of reflection, the author dramatises, through the honest emotion of one of the girls, the pain of growing up too quickly. This authorial meditation affords the reader an insight into Flora's self-confrontation about the dark side of early maturity. During her search for Shachin, she pauses to consider her plight:

> She heard a distant cry of a strange bird and touched her belly in alarm. In the last few weeks the belly had risen like Nazie's yeast cakes…Wouldn't it be wonderful if she could turn the rising baby in her belly into flour and oil, yeast and sugar? What a pity that it was not possible to pour the time and Shachin into the sacks and casks in the larder (*Persian Brides* 168).

That said, for Nazie, as for Flora before her, the wedding day is the most significant occasion of her life, a passage to children and status. Accordingly, the author, with a sure eye for detail and atmosphere, borne out of an exhaustively researched effort, succeeds in conveying much information and detail about the pre-wedding rituals. The wedding preparations infuse ephemeral meaning into the squalid, bleak lives of its heroines, who are allowed to enjoy, albeit temporarily, a respite from the incessant waiting and gossiping and some private moments of feminine attendance.

In order to look attractive on their special day, the brides undergo painful beautifying procedures, such as the lacerating removal of hair from their faces and bodies. This is done by the village hair stripper who coats the skin with melted sugar and then plucks excess hair. To whiten their teeth, the brides assiduously rub them with pecan shells until they bleed, after their hair has been rinsed with chamomile lotion. Finally, the last three days before the wedding are set aside for the bride to delouse her groom's scalp, using kerosene to wash out the lice, which are then picked out one by one and crushed (*Persian Brides* 60-61).

On another front, Rabinyan leads the reader through the authentic dishes of food prepared and ceremonial clothes worn during the wedding, rendering her abiding concern with verisimilitude and unfailing clarity. At Flora's nuptials, the bride wore a floating white dress and a gold nose ring while the groom was dressed in a, "light-blue caftan with a yellow cummerbund, topped by a green felt bonnet over an elongated skullcap" (*Persian Brides* 66-67). Also described are culinary delights such as geese dipped in honey and black plum sauce, and turkey chicks laced with herbs; chicken cooked in dry lemons and boiled chickpeas; the *dombeh,* a mix of sheep fat and chickpeas rolled into meat balls and the *labash* bread, cooked on top of a cooper frying pan. To mark the end of the celebration, guests are served with peeled apples and a potpourri of nuts and cinnamon, given to sober the drunk, followed by green kidney beans. Later, the pregnant Flora feasts on *gondi* dumplings, meatballs presented on a bed of white rice, which according to local lore is regarded as a man's dish, "good for plumping up shrunken testicles and rousing limp members" (*Persian Brides* 77). If the *gondi* is to be eaten by a woman, she is expected to press the dumplings until they crumble before placing it in her mouth.

Foremost among the pre-nuptial rituals is the *sabzi* test, performed by the bride a day before the wedding on the morning of the Henna banquet. The groom's mother investigates the central question crucial to any marriage—the bride's modesty and her skills as a housewife—through a series of intriguing tasks. The future mother-in-law ties a kerchief behind the bride's neck and kisses her on the cheeks wishing her the best of luck in her endeavours. At first, the bride displays her dexterity at cleaning and cutting the seasoning herbs, which are placed on a silver tray before her, while surrounded by the village women, dancing, laughing and beating on drums. In order to pass the test, not a single drop of blood must be shed throughout the chopping of the herbs, and the bundles of vegetables must be finely diced. Once the bride has proven her craft, the women begin a dance in her honour and the herbs are cooked in a mixture of veal and wheat from which the guests, during the Henna evening, later partake (*Persian Brides*141-143).

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, one important motif to emerge in the Mizrachi canon is the immense anxiety about the intactness of a young girl's virginity. This is a traditional value inherent in the Persian-Jewish society that is constantly emphasised. Authors exhibit the misogynistic regime of sexual relationships predominant in the milieus under discussion, whereby men see women and the female body merely as an object of desire with no significant value unless it remains undefiled before the marriage. This communal more is exemplified in the nightly pilgrimage Miriam Chanoum would make to Fleur's darkened room carrying a burning wick to light her way. While mumbling about honour and shame, she would check that her daughter's virginity is still intact. Only then, would she dress and cover her daughter, retiring for the night (*Persian Brides* 37-38).

In one instance, Flora's brother Moussa is enraged by his sister's laughter and immodest behaviour, which he fears will attract the attention of the village men. He grabs a belt, locks his sister in the shed, ties her up, and begins whipping her about the legs, pouring salt on the bleeding parts (*Persian Brides* 44). Beyond the beating, he explains to all present of his plans to prove his sister's purity:

> I'll take your right leg and tie it to this gatepost of the synagogue, then your left leg, see? Ah…And tomorrow morning all of Oumrijan will come with the women and children and pass under the synagogue to look at my sister's hole and see that she is a virgin. A virgin! A virgin! Then they won't say that the Ratoryan girls run around the village like hungry she-cats, they won't say that, ah? They won't say that Flora's brain and her hole are playing backgammon together, ah? I swear by this holy festival, I swear, if I don't do this thing, ah? (*Persian Brides* 45).

To be sure, the violent mistreatment of women is most obtrusive in *Persian Brides*. Here we find a disturbing, yet insightful tract about girls and women who are entirely dominated and victimised by their husbands and brothers. Their lives are an endless cycle of subservience to the duties of marriage, household chores, and the agonies of the beatings they suffer within an indifferent community. In one episode, Miriam Chanoum remembers an incident from her childhood involving her mother, Shirin, which forever turned her against domestic duties and cooking to please her husband. She recalls, how every morning, her mother would polish the window and floors in anticipation of the return of her husband from his bee hunting journeys. Upon his arrival, her mother was "…standing on tiptoe, her black eyes shining at her husband, as though they, too, had been burnished for hours with the iron-bristle brush" (*Persian Brides* 23). Although only five, Miriam retains a sharp recollection of her father's extraordinarily cruel reaction to his wife's efforts to please him:

> The father, with the children hanging chirpily from his legs and shoulders, stood and stared at his wife. Then he hawked up from his throat a gob of thick phlegm, filled his mouth, and squirted in her mother's face. Great was the humiliation in the eyes she lowered to the cracks between the floor tiles. Shirin wiped the yellow phlegm from her face with the end of her sleeve and asked her husband tremulously what she had done wrong. '"I had to get it out," he told her. "And the house is so clean and beautiful, I didn't want to soil it. Then you came in and I saw your dirty face, and your dry white hair, and the rags you wear, and I was glad that you'd left me one place to spit on" (*Persian Brides* 23-24).

From then on, Miriam had decided to avoid toiling away at the household chores of cooking, scrubbing, and cleaning so as not to blunt and roughen her skin and ruin her beautiful appearance. Although the neighbours regarded her as the most indolent housekeeper in the quarter, Miriam preferred to expand her time on pampering herself and her daughters with lotions and oils.

Nazie's father goes even further in asserting his power over his weak, submissive wife. His outbursts codify the general pattern of behaviour of the Jewish men. When Nazie's father finds out that his wife, whom he had earlier threatened with death if she bore him another daughter, has in fact given birth to a daughter, his disappointment and fury reach a crescendo. While his wife lies in bed bleeding and hurting from childbirth, he returns to the house, throws out his mother-in-law and sister-in-law, and proceeds to rape her (*Persian Brides* 116).

Later in the novel, Flora too is subjected to a similar assault, this time in a crowded public place. On her way to the port town of Babol-Sar, she stops off at *kahweh khooneh*, the coffeehouse next to Mamou's whorehouse. Entering the smoke-filled place, Flora is groped by the drunken patrons, "hairy paws multiplied, reaching for her breasts, her buttocks, and belly…Yellowed fingers scratched her skin, lustful hands slapped her flesh…" (*Persian Brides* 171-172). As Flora complains of aching teeth, struggling to break free, she is urged by one of the men pushing her head down to kneel and breath the fumes emanating from the opium pit. Slightly drugged from the scent, she feels the man who had lit the black lumps for her push his knees between her thighs, clutch her waist and rape her. Exhausted and shivering from the ordeal, she nevertheless manages to throw the man off and escape from the roadhouse.

The theme of extreme brutality by a husband against his wife is further referenced in the story of Shachin Bozidozi's father, in a random act of savagery. Aged five, Shachin recalls watching his mother in the kitchen baking bread and humming love songs to him. Suddenly, his father burst in. Having listened to her singing, he suspects that she has fallen in love with another man, or has betrayed him. In front of his watchful son, Shachin's father pushes his wife into the flames of the burning oven, murdering her based on his unfounded jealousy and rage (*Persian Brides* 49).

Later, as an adult, Shachin seeks to imitate his father's act. One night, he asks his wife Lily to bake him raisin bread. While she labours to bake him this culinary delight, Shachin considers shoving her into the flames, as his father did, motivated by the knowledge that her death would enable him to collect the treasure of diamonds and gold coins hidden in her cellar. Absorbed by the sweet taste of the loaf, Shachin devours the pastry, discovering to his alarm that the fire has been extinguished and that the possibility of killing his wife has been fumbled (*Persian Brides* 201). Rabinyan seeks to demonstrate that the murder of Shachin's mother was not an isolated incident, but a thread in a constellation of violent acts against women.

As in Sami Michael's *Victoria*, there is a narrow focus on the violence in the sister-brother relationship. Flora, we learn, would be, "beaten murderously all over her body…until her cries alarmed the whole village" by her brother Moussa (*Persian Brides* 32). As noted earlier, irritated by her uncontrollable laughter he would arm himself with his father's belt and flog his sister's legs, chasing her into the closed bean shed. There, while tying his sister's bleeding legs together and holding her hair in his hands, he would pour salt crystals on the wounds to increase the pain. Moussa, it seems, sees his sister as a threat to his masculinity and to his control. It might be added, that his animality is permitted by his father and mother who passively stand by.

Thus, when the pregnant Flora begins wailing for a watermelon, her brother is overcome with anger. He seizes his sobbing sister's hair as if intent on uprooting it, head butts her and spits in her face. His disregard for his sister's pain is accompanied by this menacing warning: "Look, just look how stupid you are. If you don't stop crying this minute, I'm going to smear a piece of dog shit like that husband of yours on your forehead, and bring the mirror from mother's room for you to see how dumb you are, you piece of shit…" (*Persian Brides* 82). The scene acquires added resonance and shock when the reader realises that Nazie, Moussa's intended bride, is likely to suffer the same indignities in the marriage. In this perceptive analysis, Rabinyan shares a common desire among female authors to show what lay in store for their women characters, trapped within a circuit of abuse without end.

Yet in *Persian Brides* the war between the sexes is not always one sided. One must record an almost concealed incident woven into the plot involving Miriam Chanoum on her wedding day, that promotes the idea that a strong female could sometime triumph within the rigid environment of marriage. Standing under the wedding canopy, the groom crushes the wineglass with his foot as is customary at Jewish nuptials. What follows stuns the guests: "Miriam Chanoum stamped with her heel on his polished shoe and the glass fragments crunched once more, proclaiming her dominance in her husband's house" (*Persian Brides* 21). In the first year of her marriage, Miriam avoids doing all the household chores such as cleaning and scrubbing. She feeds her suffering husband burned meat and forces him to flee the stench-filled kitchen. Amusingly, a procession of the husband's aunts and Miriam's sisters-in-law make a pilgrimage to the house to teach the laziest housekeeper in the village the necessary skills, offering to even beat her on behalf of her feeble husband. But for all their attempts, Miriam manages to outwit everyone. She stays in bed, refuses to see them, and claims she suffers from headaches, until the furious group of women decide to show her how domestic work should be done. In the end, the house is polished by the relatives, and filled with sweet smelling fragrances, while Miriam grows even more idle (*Persian Brides* 22).

In this context, it is interesting to investigate the techniques and strategies underlying the narrative and its representations, which uproot and erase any personal interference by the all-knowing voice of the narrator. At the heart of the work is a progressive distance maintained by the author from her characters, excluding any interior monologues from the continuous description of events. Thus the author allows the reader to give sanction to or to condemn the mixture of disturbing images without once commenting directly on her female protagonists' brave struggles with the men. For instance, the scenes of battery are reported in a non-judgemental, neutral manner, without being challenged by the narrator or by other characters, as Rabinyan adopts a primary strategy of authorial displacement. One explanation for this stratagem is proffered by Yael Lotan:

> Knowing that the community in question—namely, the Persian Jews—are no longer living in such conditions, that the granddaughters of Flora and Nazie do not have to put up with the abject slavery of their female ancestors, makes it possible to tell their stories without a tone of outrage clouding the narrative. The outrage arises in the reader, requiring no prompting from the author. The text is free of pathos, the story telling clean and vivid (Lotan 1997: 42).

Along with offering a glimpse into the harsh reality of being a female in an oppressive male environment, *Persian Brides* maps, in several scenes, the extraordinary disappointment the birth of a daughter is received with. In order to highlight the dichotomy inherent in the bearing of a son and the bearing of a daughter, the author sketches in a series of closely aligned sequences designed to explore the attitudes of the villagers. We learn that upon discovering that the sex of the baby was male, the midwife would burst out in a song, setting out the preparation for the circumcision ceremony and alerting the women in the next room of the wonderful tidings. They, in turn, would "join in the singing and go out into Jubareh to fill the village with joyous ululation, announcing the boy's birth and singing his father's praises. Sometimes the new mother's bliss on hearing the singing was so great that the hot afterbirth leapt so quickly up to her lungs that it suffocated her to death" (*Persian Brides* 128). Yet, if the baby was a girl, the midwife's reaction was exceedingly different, enhancing the tale's blighting cultural mentality, "...she would round her mouth, shade it with her hands, and utter a piercing long wail: 'Hoo… hoo…' And when the neighbouring women, whose ears were pressed to the door, heard the jackal wail rising from the room, they too would round their mouths and hands and join in the keening for the poor mother who had borne a daughter" (*Persian Brides* 129).

The next vignette, immediately following the omniscient narrator's account, reinforces the contempt with which daughters were regarded. It tells the story of Mashati, Nazie's mother, who resolves, before her pregnancy is known, to abort her baby when she finds out it is not a son. This follows her husband's threats that if she delivers him another daughter, he would kill her and take another wife who is able to bear him sons (*Persian Brides* 129). And so, after three months, Mashati decides to employ various agonising tactics to rid her body of the unwanted child. The matter-of-fact reporting by the prescient narrator serves to elicit from the reader a cry of pain at the poor woman's trauma and to ground the theme of gritty horror to which the women of the village are subjected to. At first, Mashati exhaustingly circles the village seven times, a waistband tightly fastened around her belly to strangle the baby. When she returns, she consumes a ewer of apple vinegar. Noticing that this has no effect, she visits the husband of a friend to secure a feather from the tail of his largest peacock. At home, shutters closed, she lies on the floor with her heels in the air and:

> … pulled the feather from the Arrack bottle, held it by its stem like an inverted writing quill, and pushed it into her body, until she felt the fine hair tickling the nose and neck of the forming female. With one hand she twisted the feather and with the other she stirred the blood that flowed on her thighs and trickled into a red pool on the carpet. She rubbed her bloodied fingers all over her body, her face, and her hair, until she passed out (*Persian Brides* 131).

She is later discovered by Miriam Chanoum and the other women, who revive the bleeding woman and tend to her wound. As it becomes public, it is the husband who is pitied for having a wife who would kill his children, and it is Mashati who is labelled a wicked woman. Mashati is ordered by the doctor not to leave her bed. In the end, the child is saved from termination.

In a flashback, we learn that as a small girl, Nazie was afflicted with the deadly disease of smallpox. On the advice of the neighbouring women, her mother Mashati, hangs Zoroastrian amulets around her cradle and chicken eyes around her neck. One winter morning, the condition worsens and the mother begins wailing, tearing her hair out and beating her breast at the sight of her dying daughter. Khodaia, the father, on the other hand, shows no comparable concern. To the contrary, his verbal and physical outburst encapsulates the disdain with which he regards his daughter and females in general:

> Her husband raged and hit her on the head. "When will you give me my sons, when? Look what a weak belly you have, you filthy woman—daughters, lousy daughters, that's all you can bear. Please God you'll die soon, too, stubborn like your mother and ugly like a demon. Another woman, I know, I need another woman, a woman with hot blood who will give me sons. A woman, are you? Disaster is all you give me with your cold blood. You chill my seed like rain, you do, all these dead girls coming out of your womb, you bitch" …He roared and kicked at her legs, and Nazie, alarmed, shrank between her mother's breasts (*Persian Brides* 105-106).

In a similar fashion to its progenitors (*Victoria* and *Mafriach Hayonim*) *Persian Brides* teems with multivalent descriptions of the legends and superstitions of its people. They occupy an equal, if not greater, part of the story, as do the unfolding events and its characters, standing alone as a separate entity. To be sure, the novel differs from its predecessors in that its wafer thin plot—Flora's journey to locate Shachin, and Nazie's feisty efforts to get married—is merely a literary clothesline upon which the author hooks her kaleidoscopic picture of native mythology, rituals and sights, culled from testimonies elicited from her Iranian grandmother and aunts.

In between chronicling the misadventures of the young women, Rabinyan fills the graphic and emotional centre of the novel with a portrait of the Oumrijan community, jettisoning any weighty discussion of the historical, social, or psychological elements that such a world offers. Instead, she confects a tragic fairy tale and a love story of teenage pregnancy, unrequited passion, adultery, and jealousy. To her credit, it must be said, that by suffusing the story's fabric with an abundance of folkloristic material, Rabinyan gives a vivid account of everyday life on the Persian scene and conjures up a tactile universe that the unfamiliar reader can almost touch and smell. Each of the hundreds of individual vignettes, portrayed with a keen eye and ear for sense and place are the building blocks of the whole work, adding up to a fully fleshed simulacrum of an Iranian village.

Persian Brides is a treasure trove of Middle Age superstitions that encircle the lives of the various families of the story. Rabinyan explores and recreates the thinking of the large cast of characters. Strewn with humour and oscillating between the comic and the grotesque, the novel uses the unique beliefs to illustrate the limited outlook and discernment of the eccentric villagers. Old wives tales and folklore underlie every aspect of contemporary existence in Oumrijan, reinforcing the natural impulse to turn to the magical. The presence of these enclosed units within the larger framework of the narrative does not rupture its bracketing, but rather moves forward the story and helps the process of narravitization.

Flora's mother, for instance, worries that she has forgotten to warn her daughter against becoming pregnant on a night when the moon is eclipsed, for, "a girl who becomes a *kuchik madar* on such an ill-omened night was doomed…That very night Miriam Chanoum appealed to demons, who amiably indicated to her that they had received her signal and would grant her entreaty" (*Persian Brides* 67-68). When Flora experiences a particularly difficult pregnancy, the village women attribute this to her falling pregnant on a cursed night, when even, "hens lay rotten blood-red eggs" (*Persian Brides* 10). The only other time they had seen such a pregnancy was in the case of Mamou the whore, who, according to village lore, was impregnated by the king of the village demons

A familiar staple looming large in several of the novels examining oriental Jewish communities is the presence of a motley crew of card readers, fortune-tellers, clairvoyants, and seers. Their role is an expository one—to hold a mirror to the society limned and to show how faith in the supernatural cuts through the heart of every protagonist. Examples of this pervade *Persian Brides*. There is Sabiya Mansour, Flora's oldest aunt who can read the Zodiac, and who advises her despondent niece to yawn deeply and continuously in order for the burnt seeds that she has inhaled to work and lure back her missing husband (*Persian Brides* 16). The longest sequence devoted to magic spells occurs on the night when Mashati, Nazie's mother, appears at the house of Sherafat, who we learn was, "adapt of mysteries and could read the future in the clouds…" (*Persian Brides* 114). The anguished mother, clutching her dying baby, pleads with the woman to save Nazie, knowing the smallpox epidemic has killed many infants. At first, Sherafat applies a thick brew of lotion made of jasmine oil, peach stones and seeds. After dressing Nazie in a small white gown whose collar has been ripped along the seam, she tells Mashati to leave the newborn with her. Mashati refuses to do so. Finally, the sorcerer woman proposes an alternative: she places Nazie on a scale, balancing it by throwing shoes collected by the mother from willing neighbours into the pan until the scales balance (*Persian Brides* 116-118). Still today it is said that Nazie owes her life to the wisdom and advice of Sherafat on that night.

Then there is Azizolla, the fortune-teller and charm maker, to whom Flora's parents turn to for prophesy about the match for their daughter and future son-in-law Shachin. The next passage starkly emphasises the novel's play of temporal modalities—while the reader finds the scene uproariously funny, aware of the absurdity of the encounter, the author remains po-faced in her description of her characters' voracious faith in the village diviner:

> The man sat cross-legged on a rug, whispering a prayer with his eyes shut. He gestured with his purple-veined hands to the visitors to come in and sit before him. He passed the fingertips of his right hand over the edge of the closed book of fortunes, moved them up and down like a blind man and abruptly opened the fateful page that would reveal the quality and future of the match. Then he opened his eyes and studied the text closely, and his face darkened. He remained silent for a long time, his eyebrows arched, as if at the sight of a gloomy future, and the purple veins in his hands turned blue...then Azizolla's face suddenly cleared. He discovered that he was holding the book of fortune upside down. Having turned it around and leafed through the seven pages forward and seven back, and read the text correctly, he hastened to allay all Miriam's Chanoum's doubts and anxieties. In exchange for three coins he declared that Flora and Shachin would be blessed (*Persian Brides* 59-60).

As stated, belief in superstition and in ancient cures is firmly rooted in the fetid lives of the novel's gaggle of characters who constantly invoke and practise it. At Flora's and Shachin's wedding, aware of the pecking eyes of the village spinsters who are grouped together and are envious of her daughter's happiness, Miriam, the bride's mother, begins shouting during the feast, "Knife! Needle! Pin! Knife! Needle! Pin!" to puncture the eyes of those resentful girls wishing harm upon her daughter (*Persian Brides* 65). Shortly afterwards, when Shachin does not return, and the neighbours' jealous sermons and curses proliferate, Miriam decides that it is time for another remedy. She sends her son Moussa, silver goblet in hand, to fill it with saliva taken from the surrounding residents, believing that this archaic dervish charm will fight the evil eye cast on her daughter. Although the neighbours swear that it was not them who were responsible for the spells, they oblige Moussa with their spit, quickly topping up the cup (*Persian Brides* 84-85).

In the same section, we read that Choma, Miriam's second daughter, did not speak until the age of five and was thought to be mute. Concerned that the mustard seeds she was giving her daughter every morning were not working, Miriam decides to follow the words of wisdom told to her by a healer from Isfahan. The healer had said that boiled water, drawn from a well, mixed with one leaf from the tree of tongues would stir the tongue of every mute. Intent on trying all methods, she makes her way to Isfahan where she picks three leaves from the tree of tongues, which are then boiled and given to Choma. Several days later, Choma begins speaking. However, from that day on, since her mother deviated from the healer's advice, the young girl has not ceased talking.

Adherence to old rituals is again displayed when Choma becomes infertile after the death of her first son. Her mother captures all types of lizards to let loose in Choma's house only to have them escape. Choma's brother Moussa then wanders the fields of Oumrijan in search of mandrakes, which spread an alluring aroma and intoxicate the barren woman but prove to be of no help (*Persian Brides* 145-146).

Persian Brides is distinguished from the other Mizrachi novels surveyed in this book by its author's decision to confect a world almost denuded of any Jewish tradition or practice. In Rabinyan's world, Judaic customs and beliefs have been replaced almost entirely by outrageous superstition and magic. There is no trace of the Holy days, the dietary laws, or the Sabbath. Additionally, this community of Jews, within a predominating Islamic society, seems to be filled with no spiritual, cultural, or educational element drawn from their rich heritage. They are isolated from the adhesive golden thread of Judaism that sustained the scattered congregations of the Diaspora for the period of imposed exile. To be sure, there is no indication that the host of characters are linked to the neighbouring Jewish Persian communities, which history informs us did preserve a modicum of ritual practice, such as celebrating the various festivals and attending synagogue. This truism figures most prominently in Nazie's attempts to secure the affirmation that she is physically ready for marriage, even though she has not reached the required age of twelve. In desperation, she turns not to the local rabbi, but to the Muslim Mullah, entering his room at the mosque and pleading with him to bypass the law enacted by Reza Shah Palavi and bestow his consent (*Persian Brides* 157-160). And indeed, the wedding takes place following the Mullah's confirmation that Nazie is of marriageable age, without any involvement of the Jewish clergy.

In fact, the only veritable external cultural signifier attesting to the characters' Judaic ancestry is the fashion in which their houses are built, chiefly to placate Muslim honour, "Nazie ran after her along the row of Jewish houses, whose roofs were lower, by law, than those of the Muslims, as were their doors—lest they grow proud" (*Persian Brides* 73).

There are other essential markers. A current of anti-Semitism flares up during the spread of the smallpox epidemic. In the early stages of the disease, the Muslims believe that it is only their children who are struck with the killer plague, not the Jews, because of the substantial amounts of wine and beer they consume. However, their jealous anger abates once they hear the cries of anguish emanating from the Jewish quarter (*Persian Brides* 102).

To be fair, the text in general does manage to sporadically reference archetypal Jewish customs and characters, footnoting a few associative cases of traditional elements that point out an ephemeral link between the residents of the village and their patrimony. For example, during the outbreak of the smallpox epidemic, Nazie's mother obeys Rabbi Netanel's counsel that she feed the baby slips of paper inscribed with verses from the Book of Psalms that he had written out, and to repeatedly whisper admonitions in her ear to aid her growth. Likewise, when Choma's efforts to fall pregnant are to no avail, she swallows psalm notes written by Rabbi Netanel (*Persian Brides* 103). And though the feast of Shavuot is mentioned only in passing (*Persian Brides* 55, 63), Judaism does shine through on the wedding day of Flora, as Rabbi Netanel, acting as a matchmaker and scribe, prepares a highly decorated *ketubah* (Jewish wedding contract) for the bride and groom. In that connection, Shachin's father cautions his son about the dangers of assimilation: "Another important rule he had learned early from his father was never to insert the worm that hung between his legs into the cocoons of alien women, lest gentile butterflies issued from them" (*Persian Brides* 53).

Naomi Gutkind praises Rabinyan's effort in bringing the Persian Jewish community into the frame of Israeli literature through her bewitching and absorbing evocation of a people rarely the subject of fictional treatment. Gutkind nevertheless objects to Rabinyan's portrayal of her protagonists as blind to Judaism, claiming that Rabinyan has used the tool of creative license to sift out and distort the true circumstances of Persian Jewish life. Gutkind writes: "The representation of the Jewish-Persian villagers as a tribe whose world is exclusively devoted to vulgar drinking, eating and superstitions, and its mental profile as that of fortune tellers, seems to me to be tendentious, parodic and aggressive…" (Gutkind 1995: 6).

Haim Nagid sees Rabinyan's opus within a larger context, arguing that it is part of a new Israeli corpus which defines itself against Diasporic Judaism, rather than the conventional Israeli narrative. As such, the novel expresses an overt indifference to the inherited Israeli plot which tackled the struggles of the founding fathers, and later bemoaned the dilution of their Zionist dream. He correctly posits that Rabinyan's work signals the flowering of an enjoyable and original fiction that could have been written everywhere and in any other language, but was written in Hebrew and does challenge the sometimes conservative and dogmatic superstructure of the past (Nagid 1995: 6).