

ALMOND TREE ALLEY IN OMERIJAN
BY DORIT RABINIAN AS A FICTIONAL TEXT
APPEALING TO THE WAY OF LIFE
AND TRADITION IN THE JEWISH
COMMUNITY IN IRAN

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Introduction

Before world literature had seen writing blossom about the way of life characteristic of the countries of the Persian Gulf, and before this had filtered into Israeli literature, two novels appeared by Dorit Rabinian, a young woman author: *Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan*¹ and *Our Weddings*.² The narrative in both novels focuses on the lives of Jewish families and their lifestyle, binding all this clearly with Iranian culture. It appears that *Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan* is the first work of modern Hebrew literature to expose consumers of Hebrew-Israeli culture to a view permitting a wide and varied gamut of impressions of the culture of Iranian Jews as this comes to the fore in their language, their customs, their beliefs, and their way of life.³ The novel tells the story of a Jewish

¹ Dorit Rabinian, *Simtat ha-Shkediot be-Omerijan (Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan)*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1995). An English translation from the original Hebrew appeared as *Persian Brides* (Dorit Rabinyan, *Persian Brides*, transl. Yael Lotan ,NYC: George Braziller, 1998). The present paper makes no use of the published English version. All passages quoted from the text of the novel based directly on Rabinian's original text. Here and throughout the present paper, all quotations from research literature and primary sources are by Elen Rochlin.

² Idem, *Ha-Chatunot Shelanu (Our Weddings)*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999).

³ After the publication of the novel, ever since the beginning of the new millennium, a literary flowering can be documented in Hebrew literature, linked to the "Persian experience." The writing reflects an attempt to achieve a mutual synthesis of the two cultures, the Jewish and the Persian. To note a number of examples: Yossi Avni-Levi, *Ke-Neged Arba'ah Banim (Of Four Sons)*, Tel Aviv:

family's two young daughters, Flora and her cousin Nezzi. It also describes the lifestyle of the family subsisting in a Jewish neighborhood in Iran, rooted, on the one hand, in local culture, which is Persian, and on the other hand, reflecting the protagonists' being rooted since time immemorial in their heritage as Jews.

Research done on Rabinian's work addresses the discourse emerging from a text whose protagonist is a woman, so that notions of discourse familiar in the West, such as subject and object, are tested anew in light of the attitude toward women and their bodies as physical subjects in the cultural space shaped by the novel. Addressing the question of the feminine body in the novel, Roni Halpern argues that it "exposes clearly the way in which the degradation of women is argued for in terms of the feminine body." She suggests taking the parallel step of "locating the feminine struggle for subjectivity in the ways of understanding, of interpreting, and of representing of their own bodies by women."⁴ Yosef Oren studies the representative family stories in the novels. As per his claim, the stories convey a life experience which is part of the one described in the Jewish quarter in Omerijan and which can be associated "with the ethnic creativity continually expanding in Israeli narrative." As per his argument, the veridicality of *Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan* is doubtful insofar as the work is presented "to a reader who does not know a thing about Jewish life in a remote small village in Persia."⁵ Yafah

Zmorah-Betan, Amudim le-Sifrut, 1998), Pierre Lavi, *Orgei ha-Chalomot mi-Teheran (Weavers of Dreams from Teheran*, Jerusalem: Pierre Lavi Enterprise, 2009), Sarah Aharoni, *Ahavat Sultanat (Sultana's Love*, Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2009), Ofra Matzov-Cohen, *Be-Maslul Yaldutah (Tracking Her Childhood*, Tel Aviv: Gevanim, 2012), and Dr. Itzik Benyamini, blogging at *Ani Parsi (I am Persian)*, <https://sites.google.com/site/itzhakbenyamini/cv/profile>.

A book of an outstandingly documentary-historical-Zionistic bent was written by Meir Ezri, Israel's first ambassador to Iran: *Tziyon Ezri: Be-Oz U-ve-Ahavat Tziyon, 1892-1965, Toldot Chayim (Tziyon Ezri: In Strength and Love of Zion, 1892-1965, A Life Story*, published by Meir Ezri, ed. Sasson Blum, Center for Guidance in Israel's Libraries, no place or date of publication).

⁴ Roni Halpern, "Sicho ha-Alternativi shel ha-Guf: Keriah be-Simtat ha-Shkediyot le-Dorit Rabinian" ("The Body's Alternative Discourse: A Reading of *Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan* by Dorit Rabinian") in *Ha-Tishma Koli*, ed. Yael Atzmon (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuchad, 2001), 185, 185-198. Here and throughout the present paper, all quotations from research literature and primary sources are by Elen Rochlin. Translator's note.

⁵ Yosef Oren, "Ha-Chatunot Shelanu – Dorit Rabinian" ("Our Weddings – Dorit Rabinian") in *Kolot Chadashim ba-Sipporet ha-Yisraelit (New Voices in Israeli Narrative*, Rishon le-Tziyon: Yachad, 1997).

Benyamini notes that the novel follows up on other works of Hebrew literature written by authors from Islamic countries. But unlike them, Rabinian is a woman, and Israeli-born; as an author, she brings in linguistic materials both surprising and impressive.⁶

The question of authenticity in a fictional text is, then, of considerable significance. It pertains to the ways in which authenticity is constructed, involving the materials this makes use of.⁷ In discussions of textual authenticity, similar to other areas of research, the question arises in a variety of respects: for instance, in connection with language, the question of language and style will arise, while in connection with theology, sacral values which the text may contain and the holiness of writ will become relevant.

In referring to the idea of ‘truth’ in Soren Kierkegaard’s texts Eyal Levin addresses the subject in dealing with the totality of the life and being of human creatures. The attempt of the human being to be him or himself is what Kierkegaard calls “the authentic life.” He addresses the characterization of the authentic human being by placing the “I” (the “subject”) in opposition to the environment (the “object”). Authenticity is the correspondence between personal selfhood and its internality and its external manifestations, whatever their content. The human being as subject can realize the authentic potential embedded within his or her personality if he or she overcomes the general and positions the self “over and above it.”⁸

Hans Georg Gadamer steers the issue of authenticity to the question of the truth to be uncovered in any one particular text. In his book *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, Gadamer argues that the decisive question is, what knowledge will be achieved as a result of authentic understanding of the text.

Yaakov Golomb deals with the question of optimal expressions of authenticity in various areas of art; the same question draws the attention of thinkers about authenticity, who deliberate concerning “how to speak positively about the ideal of authenticity, which by its very nature

⁶ Yafah Benyamini, “*Ha-Chatunot Shelanu*” (“*Our Weddings*”) in *Iyunim be-Romanim Meturgamim u-Mekoriyim* (Kefar Saba: Gavia, 2000), 255, 254-269.

⁷ Prima facie, Iranian landscapes are not part of the author’s childhood. She has no experience of the atmosphere of the place, but has only heard about it from others—for instance, from Iranian immigrants, from her parents, who, probably self-evidently, continued after immigration to maintain a life routine reminiscent of how they had lived in the land of their birth.

⁸ Hebrew translation by Eyal Levin of *Fear and Trembling* by Soren Kierkegaard (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 20.

absconds from all requirements and unambiguous definitions.” As per his claim, in order to pinpoint its forms, there must be “some normative standards of measurement.” These are to be found in literature, a field in which it is possible to make “didactic use of different literary styles, the principal element being irony.”⁹ Golomb argues that the variety of literary modes, “such as the scintillation of meanings achieved in literature, are a way of making the reader aware that there is no one defined path leading to authenticity, and that being authentic means devising for yourself your own way and your own life behavior patterns.”¹⁰

The discourse unfolding in *Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan* appeals to Jewish culture and its heritage, as well as to the local Persian culture. To do this, it grounds itself in language use, relying on language as a system of signs for achieving communication. It also makes use of additional systems of signs, which serve, to borrow the phrase from the linguist Tzvi Sarel, “to tie the knot of communication with the Other, such as ceremonies in religion and ritual, social ceremonies... myths, customs, and rules of conduct.”¹¹ In the present article I aim to uncover expressions of authenticity in a fictional text, and so to study the extent to which Rabinian’s novel approaches reality as this comes to the fore in the lifestyle and social norms of the Jewish way of life in Iran. This especially in light of the claim made in the research literature, which emphasizes that even though Rabinian wove in “extreme and bizarre—even impossible—lifestyle elements,” she did not specify these things with reference to the level of authenticity or in comparison with it.¹² Is authenticity in a work preserved in the various things the work describes, and if so, what are its forms of expression?

Let us refer to the work by Meir Ezri as an aid in testing the way authenticity is shaped on a cultural basis: *Tziyon Ezri: In Strength and Love of Zion, 1892-1965, A Life Story*. The work belongs to the field of biography and autobiography. Even though the book focuses on the life of the central characters and the narrative unfolds from the point of view of the son, who writes down the life story of his father, the book can provide substantial aid to insight thanks to its depth. It is based on documents and hundreds of pieces of data; it also deals with Persian cultural customs in

⁹ Yaakov Golomb, *Abir ha-Emunah O Gibor ha-Kefirah (The Knight of Faith Or the Hero of Heretical Denial*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1999), 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ Tzvi Sarel, *Mavo le-Nituach ha-Siach (Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 1988), 37.

¹² Oren, 81.

connection with the Jewish way of life in Iran as Ezri describes it.¹³ I will aim to test the shaping of authenticity in the cultural space of the Jewish society described in the novel in light of this work.

Territorial Space as Inter-Cultural Boundary

Descriptions of the landscape in the novel, which include mentions of names of gates, mountains, villages, and markets, are the primal basis upon which the rural stage setting of the action is constructed. A prominent indication of this is the name of the place where the plot unfolds, Almond Tree Alley—the Jewish neighborhood’s prominent landscape. The toponym suggests a closed and bounded area, the world of

¹³ The book, published in Hebrew and in Persian and of an openly documentary-historical-Zionistic bent, is a detailed description of the life and work of the writer’s father, Tziyon Ezri, in Iran and in Israel, both before the birth of the State of Israel and thereafter. The book treats the figure of Tziyon Ezri in a double fashion: it surveys his life from a personal point of view, casting Ezri the father as a teenager and a young man in the different statuses of his life, a student in the prestigious school “*Alliance*,” or a college student (who earns his keep as a private teacher of French for the head of the Kashkai, a key tribe in Central and Southern Iran [see Ezri, 31], as a peddler making his way among the villages to sell sewing notions [see *ibid.*, 21], and as a horseman in the service of the gendarmerie [*ibid.*, 33]); the work also narrates Tziyon Ezri’s life from the historical viewpoint: it shows him as a Zionist activist operating with state authorization, forging ties between Iran with its rich cultural tradition, and Israel, a newborn state. The book is all-encompassing in its treatment not only of the family narrative and the space in which the author documents his father’s activity as a Zionist and politician, but also of the spectrum of links to the cultural foundations of Iranian society throughout the periods of its history, on the one hand, and of the Jewish community forming part of this society since time immemorial, on the other. See the book review in: Ofra Matzov-Cohen, E-mago, <http://www.e-mago.co.il/Editor/literature-3203.htm>, Jan. 17, 2010. 30/06/13. David Gurevich traces the changes taking place in the 20th century in the way history as a discipline perceives the writing of historical events. This is connected with personal biographical narrative as a stratum of substance in the construction of national historical spaces conveyed in Ezri’s work. Gurevich indicates the multiplicity of points of view among historians “with subjective points of view turning would be factual angles into their interpretations.” The postmodern historical narrative offers a “narrative option. Albeit this narrative is problematic, fighting against the will to be free of the ethical obligation to the truth.” Hand in hand with this claim, which makes the reliability of the text questionable all over again, Gurevich notes the advantages of historical narrative, singling out the elements it sustains of subjectivity and esthetic appeal (Gurevich, *Postmodernism*, 71).

the Jews in miniature within the totality of Iranian territory. The very word “alley” is evocative of the dynamic of a narrow passageway, as implied by a life suffused with the sense of crowded neighborliness and no chance of intimacy. Thus, the word “*omerijan*” has the ending “jan,” meaning “soul,” or “my life” in Persian. This suggests a historic old neighborhood with a social heritage all its own, representative of its inhabitants. The neighborhood is first mentioned along with the different districts of Iran and its best-known cities: the city of Babul located on the Caspian Sea shore, the oil town of Abadan, “the mountains of Alboraz [...] the city of Shiraz,” and urban centers such as Asfahan, where the plot unfolds, Teheran,¹⁴ and others.

The circle involving the life of the Jews in Iran is evidence of the influence of Iranian culture alongside observance of the tradition of the fathers and the Halachic Jewish way of life. Two circles are operative within the same space, the wider one being that of the rural Persian milieu, with the entrance gate to it known as Darwaza Mushtrei Gate. The more constricted circle is that of Jewish rural society; the Jewish quarter in the village, known as Jubareh, is testimony to the fact that the Jews lived within a bounded and closed area.¹⁵ Of Jubareh Ezri writes in his book that it was one of the four villages annexed to the city of Asfahan, which was considered a large urban hub, as borne out by the Persian saying about its resplendent magnificence: “Asfahan is half the world.”¹⁶ As per his account, Jubareh, also known as Yehudiyeh (“Jewtown”), was first

¹⁴ The city of Teheran has a special description devoted to it in the novel, addressing two periods: the historical-mythological period associated with Golistan, a young girl, and Hurshid, the royal sculptor (“*Gol*” meaning “flower” in Persian, while “*stan*” is “springtime,” making the compound “Golistan” denote “spring flowers”). Flora, the Jewish young woman, is enchanted by the fairy tale, appropriating its happy end, which provides her with moral support vis-à-vis her own personal predicament. The narrator notes that the fairy tale is performed as a love song, usually by women, regardless of their religious identity, thus gesturing toward the Jewish community’s being steeped in Iranian culture.

The second period in connection with which the capital city of Teheran appears is the present, when “a glorious ambassadors’ procession takes place in honor of King Rizah Shah Pahlevi in Midan a-Safah Square.” The public making up the procession includes “Jews, and Armenians, and Zoroastrians, who worship fire.” The mention of the Jews as a part of the overall minority population making up Iranian society indicates that, even though marginalized, they, like the Iranian nation, honor the King (Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley in Omerijan*, 10-11).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁶ Ezri, 13. The phrase was coined by Sheikh Hussein Jabari Ansari, poet and thinker, who “attributed the building of Asfahan to King Solomon.” See *ibid.*, 14.

populated by Jews at the beginning of the Moslem conquest of Iran in the seventh century. This is how Ezri describes the construction of Jubareh:

The houses and the neighborhoods of the Jews had a unique shape all their own. Jews were forbidden to build their houses above the road, so that they would not resemble their Moslem surroundings. At the beginning of the alley, a narrow passageway was constructed with a sharp curve. [...] Houses with thick doors made of wood were built on both sides of the passageway. [...] Every door led to a stairwell, from there leading to another deep courtyard.¹⁷

The structure of the houses in the Jewish quarter is similarly portrayed in the novel: “as dictated by state law, their roofs lower than the roofs of the houses of the Moslems, and their doors, too, also lower, lest their hearts grow haughty.”¹⁸

The greatness of the city of Asfahan and the enormous distance separating it from the villages it had annexed, comes to the fore in the novel during the journey which Miriam Chanom makes from the Jewish quarter in the village to the city: “with the coming of spring she went so far [...] as the city of Asfahan.”¹⁹ The distance gestures toward the monumental cultural differences between the life of the city and that of the village. And indeed, Ezri recounts that when he was a child, his father planned to build a house for the family beyond the limits of the Asfahan ghetto, and that “the matter was bound up with enormous complications, because of the risk implied in making the transition to a non-Jewish environment.”²⁰ The same thing finds its expression in the novel, as the characters try to minimize the time they spend outside the alley; most often, it is the men who do depart from the Jewish quarter.

An expression of the duality of the Jewish space subsisting within the Persian societal spaces and influenced by Persian culture can be seen in the goings on in the market square. This last is described as a locus both appealing and enchanted, with access to it forbidden to young Jewish women. This is how the place begins to seem magical and colorful to the young daughters of the Returian family, Nezzi and Flora. Flora sings its praises: “a town beautiful like a foreign land!”²¹ Her singing about the place is expressive of her yearning to be there, and to enjoy its sights. The image she avails herself of, “like a foreign land,” expresses, on the one

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 63.

¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

²⁰ Ezri, 96.

²¹ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 143.

hand, the attractiveness of the market, and on the other, the great distance between herself and it, a distance created as a result of behavioral norms forbidding Jewish women to enter public places, out of fear that they may be in danger because of their sex and their origins. Thus, when Nezzi goes off alone to the market, “amazed gazes follow her everywhere, lowing laughter, and mocking calls.”²² When she dares head for the market alone at another time, she goes through brutal assault, including repulsive sexist comments and forced opium smoking meant to distort her senses.²³ This nocturnal sortie of Nezzi’s from the Jewish quarter into alien territory, as well as the restrictions affecting the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter in Jubareh involve genuine danger.

Even so, there are some Jewish merchants’ shops in the market,²⁴ a detail shedding light on the Jews’ merging with the economic life of Iran. Take, for instance, “Yaakov the fragrance man,” “who also sold healing stones and lumps of crystal in his small shop in the market.”²⁵ The image of the market in the eyes of the Jews stems from the atmosphere of moral licentiousness typifying it. This mood comes to the fore, for instance, in the image of “Yaakov the fragrance man” in the eyes of his wife. Her jealousy and suspiciousness are aroused when his clothes emit a “scent of womanly desire,” something suggestive of physical intimacy between strangers. This is typical of the market which signifies a place not subject to accepted norms.

Linguistic Expressions in the Novel as a Reflection of the Jews’ Culture within Alien Space

Given Names and Family Names

The one most prominent characteristic of Jewish culture within the alien space is the linguistic, put to use in the Persian language and implying symbolic cultural meanings.

Most of the characters in the novel have common Persian names. Some of these are family names indicative of double cultural affiliation, such as Hebrew and Armenian, for instance, Azizian, a name compounded of

²² Ibid., 133.

²³ Ibid., 147.

²⁴ In addition, there is the house of Mamu the Prostitute, with Mamu’s daughters playing openly in the courtyard, thus forming a part of the life of the market square. Within the limits of the same square, the mother offers her services as if they were merchandise in all respects, unashamed and free.

²⁵ Ibid., 99.

“Aziz,” a particle meaning “a person one holds dear” in Persian,²⁶ and the ending “-ian” typical of Iranian Jewish family names as a result of local Armenian influence.²⁷ This is the structure of the name in the Returian family, whose daughters’ tale forms the hub of the novel.²⁸

Personal names in the novel are also reflections of local cultural influence: names such as Soli; Iran;²⁹ “Shahin”³⁰ (with the meaning of “from the family of the Queen” in Persian); Flora,³¹ meaning “flower”; Nezzi, an abbreviation of the name Nzenin, which means “excellent, refined, gentle”;³² Huma, a common feminine name among Iranian Jews, borrowed from the name of a bird possessing supernatural powers in Persian mythology; Sultana (Princess);³³ Mahtav Chanom, which translates as “Lady Moon”; Manijun,³⁴ a compound formed of two words: “mani” (grandmother) and “jun” (soul), which, taken together, combine to mean “dear grandmother.” Similar are Shahnez Tamizi,³⁵ with the meaning of “queen of gentleness,” and Zuleicha, a common feminine name in countries of the Persian Gulf and among women in the Jewish community

²⁶ The expression “Azizam,” “precious to me,” is common in Persian as a way to refer to someone familiar and close to the speaker. Thus, Nezzi’s aunt responds joyfully to the news about Nezzi’s approaching wedding, addressing her with the term of endearment, “Azizam, congratulations, Azizam!” (Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 185).

²⁷ The Armenians are one of the nationalities making up the Iranian population. See Ezri, 13.

²⁸ Other family names which are also expressive of double cultural affiliation include, for instance, the author’s family name: Rabinian. In his book, Ezri notes that his mother’s maiden name was “Yomtovian” (Ezri, 39); see also “Rivka Chachimian,” the name of an Iranian immigrant in the novel *Tracking Her Childhood* (Matzov-Cohen, 43). The initial part of the word is a reference to the occupation of the father of the family, rabbi and sage, while the ending is a product of the influence of Armenian.

²⁹ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 17. Character names are not translated or explained in the novel. I have availed myself of the knowledge of Mrs. Shulamit Cohen, a native of Asfahan and speaker of Persian, and Mr. Nissim Cohen, a native of Chumsar and also a speaker of Persian.

³³ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 183.

³⁴ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 19. The meaning of the ending “jun” is “soul,” the ending usually being added as a term of endearment.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

in Iran. In Ezri's book, for instance, "Zuleicha" appears as the name of the author's grandmother.³⁶

We can sum up by saying that many women's given names are names of flowers and natural phenomena of the kind that manifest themselves to the eye, are accessible to the senses esthetically, or are fragrant. These names are not Hebrew in origin, but are borrowed from local Persian culture; their use is indicative of local cultural influence upon the culture of the Jewish community.

Terms of Address and Good Manners as an Expression of Social Norms

The language of the Jews in the novel is studded with a variety of forms of politeness borrowed from foreign languages, such as from French, which was studied in Iran among the educated and the wealthy class as a foreign language:³⁷ "Mademoiselle Huma, I have made you Madam,"³⁸ says the midwife Zuleicha to Huma, who is going through birthing pangs and labor; by using French forms of address, Zuleicha's comment indicates the change in status for the new mother.³⁹ "Bebachshid, Miriam Chanom will forgive me," thus a form in the third person used to address a woman. The word "Chanom," "Mistress," is added out of respect, even though the person addressed is a close family relative, and the term has no connection to her social or economic status.⁴⁰ The expression "with forgiveness from your Honor"⁴¹ is used when addressing a person of higher standing than the speaker. "Ameh buzurg," Great Aunt (in the novel, the reference is to the sister of Nezzi's father, Miriam Chanom),⁴² is used out of special respect for the sister of the father. The expression "kutzchik madar,"

³⁶ Ezri, 41. In an orthographic variant, the name (spelled with a *kaf*, rather than a *chet* in Hebrew) appears in the Midrash and Aggadic sources as the name of Potiphar's wife.

³⁷ For the importance of this language in the eyes of the upper class in Iran, see Ezri, 31.

³⁸ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 123.

³⁹ "Mademoiselle" is a title for a young woman who is single, while "Madam" is mistress, a married woman. In 2012, a linguistic change was enacted in France, annulling the use of the term "Mademoiselle," so as to prevent references which may be irrelevant to a woman's family status. See also <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/1.1648236>.

⁴⁰ See also Ezri, 40.

⁴¹ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 103.

meaning “little mother,” serves as a respectful name for a young woman who is also a mother.⁴³ The expression is an echo of the once accepted social custom of marrying off girls at a very young age, sometimes, while they were still in utero.⁴⁴ The marriage would be arranged between the two sets of parents without taking into consideration the wishes of the future couple; the practice is echoed in the words of Miriam Chanom as she tries to convince Flora to marry the bald Mortozza Cailu by arguing that, “What do you think? Did I want to get married to your father?”⁴⁵

Ezri describes the customs accepted among Asfahan Jews (who were seen as especially enlightened and educated among the various communities of Iranian Jewry), noting that the arranged marriage of his parents⁴⁶ was preceded by an accidental meeting between Tziyon Ezri, the groom-to-be, as a young man, and his wife, then a seven-year-old schoolgirl described as a “teeny-girly” whose looks appealed to him. Tziyon’s representatives—his elder brother and his father—asked for the girl’s hand.⁴⁷ After the terms of marriage were signed between Ezri’s father’s and his mother’s parents, the engagement continued for seven years, a time period in which the girl grew up and became a maiden able to marry. Both Ezri and the narrator in the novel comment upon the legal change in Persia, which was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century when the Shah restricted the marriageable age of young girls in Iran to no earlier than the future bride’s 12th year—and even that, on condition that she “reach capacity”—so as to prevent the perpetuation of a severely problematic situation common earlier, when terms of marriage

⁴³ Another word suggesting diminution and gesturing to an image of the gentle and refined Persian woman and her fragility appears in the phrase “Nezzichi,” a compound made up of “Nezzi,” a feminine name, and “chi,” a diminutive or term of endearment: “When they had understood that this was Nezzichi Returian dressed up as a gypsy [...]” It is the villagers, who favor Nezzi, that refer to her in this way (Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 133).

⁴⁴ And see also the novel *Tracking Her Childhood*, where two families who had lost children at a young age, due primarily to illness, agree a priori that should the wives give birth to a son and a daughter, the two would marry in due time. According to folk belief, the agreement is supposed to guarantee a long life for the future children: “Eliyahu was destined to marry Yafah [...] even before she was born, this was agreed upon [...] if there should be born [...] a healthy daughter, she will be a match for Eliyahu, and the two of them would marry each other when the time should come” (Matzov-Cohen, *Tracking Her Childhood*, 99).

⁴⁵ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 155.

⁴⁶ The period in question is the first decade of the 20th century, the period Rabinian intends in her narrative.

⁴⁷ Ezri, 40.

would be signed between the two sets of parents while the baby girl would still be in utero.⁴⁸

The legal change and its implementation in practice are reflected in the novel when young Nezzi needs to obtain a formal confirmation from the authorities so as to be able to marry the man her heart is set upon. To go about obtaining this, she attempts a conversation with Jafir, a Moslem cleric, in order to convince him to permit her to get married in violation of the strict letter of the law.⁴⁹ Whatever the case, it appears that in each of the situations described, in the fictional text just as in the biographical one, women, having no status in Iranian society, are dwarfed even further. The legal amendment further makes this a fixed and permanent reality.

The names of the men are also Jewish but characterized by local Moslem influence. Thus, for instance, the name of the cousin to whom Nezzi is affianced, is "Musa," or Moses, a name common among Iranian Jews, and so, too, "Suleiman the Jewish miller," whose shop is located in the bazaar.⁵⁰ There is also use of names which are obviously Moslem, such as the clearly Moslem name of Roholla the Butcher, whose shop is close to the Returian family's butcher shop; he is known as the "Jewish butcher." It appears that his nickname helps identify him without fail as a Jew, considering that his first name does not give away his origins. Ezri notes that in 1928, the Persian government decreed that "henceforth, every Iranian citizen will bear a last name, and will no longer be called by means of reference to the name of his father." This decision motivated the Jews of Asfahan to take Hebrew family and first names, though not all Jews joined in the effort, and some gave their children names taken from Persian lore.⁵¹ Evidently, use of the Persian language as part of the Jews' way of life is an inextricable part of most of the areas of life described in the text of the work.

Folk Beliefs as Part of Local Language and Culture

The Jews' language is shot through with local expressions and turns of phrase indicative of a folkloristic way of life impacted by mysticism, and of reliance on superstitious beliefs which pervade all areas of life. Familiarity with this lore reflects the cultural duality which is testimony to local influence and to the integration of the Jews in local culture, as well as to indebtedness to their Jewish heritage. For instance, preoccupation

⁴⁸ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 137-138.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵¹ Ezri, 87.

with the evil eye is rife and varied:⁵² Miriam Chanom and her husband appeal to “Azizulah [...] a fortuneteller who had also achieved some renown as a master of incantations.” She is knowledgeable in this area, able to tell apart portentous words in talk concerning the evil eye. Such talk portends good tidings when the subject is children, fish, and the approaching summer heat; it bears a negative message, presaging the evil eye when talk is about “death of their dear ones, their poverty and illnesses.” Other practices used to cast away the evil eye include “incantations of the Farhiz.”⁵³ In addition, there is the knife typically placed by a woman under her daughter’s pillow so as to make the sharp blade keep evil spirits away, and ceremonies performed by the bride’s mother at the wedding in order to make the evil eye keep far from the bride and her family. Miriam Chanom performs a variety of ceremonies aimed at a particular purpose: restoring an unfaithful husband to the arms of his mate,⁵⁴ determining the most auspicious date for the impregnation of a woman,⁵⁵ enticing good luck into the house,⁵⁶ delaying misfortune, and even inviting calamity, such as the destruction of a house and its very foundations.⁵⁷ She resorts to various means to sustain the beliefs: geckoes, the power of the gaze, and the tradition of slips of paper with texts from the Book of Psalms inscribed upon them, which are given out by the widowed R. Mulla Netanel, as a source of luck and blessing.⁵⁸

It would appear that Rabinian makes exaggerated use of fulsome description of folk beliefs, doing this as a part of conveying the mindset of a rural Jewish community where most of the inhabitants are not educated, relying rather on customs familiar and rooted in local culture. But the exaggeration, as noted by Oren,⁵⁹ is likely to be part of a fictional stylization of authentic being which connects with the dire economic predicament of the Jews. This should probably explain the Jews’ ways in Jubareh: most of them earn their livelihood by selling cameos and from

⁵² Yom-Tov Levinsky notes that “all ancient peoples believed in the magical power of the evil eye to cause harm.” He cites examples from the Jewish heritage (Yom-Tov Levinsky, *Entziklopediyah shel Havai u-Masoret ba-Yahadut [Encyclopedia of the Way of Life and Tradition in Judaism]*, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1975], vol. 2, 538).

⁵³ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 51.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Rabinian, *ibid.*, 94, 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Yosef Oren, “*Ha-Chatunot Shelanu—Dorit Rabinian*” (“Our Weddings – Dorit Rabinian”) in *Ha-Kol ha-Nashi ba-Sipporet ha-Yisraelit (The Feminine Voice in Israeli Narrative)*, Rishon le-Tzayon: Yachad, 2001), 81.

petty trade, depending on each other for their income. This makes engaging in folk beliefs a psycho-social must which aids the acceptance of reality, and even creates a humorous atmosphere of different tones, which subsists throughout the novel. Golomb argues that one of the ways to express authenticity is the literary, which makes it possible to take advantage of “different literary styles,” this really being a tool “for bringing it into the reader’s consciousness that there is no one definite way leading to authenticity.”⁶⁰ It follows that in the novel, the author produces authenticity which is bound to be partly subjective, fitting the way of life of the fictional quarter in the village; in part, this authenticity is also based on extant cultural foundations. All this is meant to bring the reader closer to the positions implicit within the text, or “to provoke a real response from the readers, and a significant change in their way of life, as well as in their way of relating to themselves and their selfhood.”⁶¹

The language of the Jews combines both benedictory phrases, such as “mubaraket bashi” for “congratulations”⁶² and maledictions and derogatory expressions or words expressive of misery and wretchedness, such as “gurba kasafat,” meaning “filthy cat,”⁶³ and “zachnebut,” or “poison,”⁶⁴ and “Vaveyla,” which means, “Woe!” The word “aundereh” forms an exception, its meaning being “miserable,” while the word itself is compounded from a bi-lingual phrase: borrowing “awon” (aun-) from the Hebrew, it combines this with a Persian ending, making the whole mean, “this involves iniquity” (i.e., it is pitiful).⁶⁵ The word is an instance of the idiom spoken by Iranian Jews and based on words from Persian and Hebrew at once, as well as Hebrew phrases of adage-like portent; coinages of this kind were an exclusive part of the language of the Jews.⁶⁶

Phrases typically uttered by the novel’s characters are a way to indicate their being steeped in local culture and its customs. The pithy sayings are rich in imagery and vivid color, succulent and reflective of practices and

⁶⁰ Golomb, 39.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶² Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 199.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁶ For example, an expression accepted among Iranian Jews is “language not created,” literally meaning “void of words, lacking a language.” This is used to convey a warning to the listener about not mentioning—not in a single word—some certain topic in the conversation. The coinage can be appreciated in parallel to the common phrase, “Walls have ears.”

norms, with many of them characterized by exaggeration. For example, “I will extract my own eye, my beloved, Azizam.”⁶⁷

Most of the typical sayings and turns of phrase revolve about the essential stages in a woman’s life. Thus, a saying referring to a crucial event in the life of a woman: an admonition against availing oneself of two midwives at once, for “a baby pulled by two midwives will have its head torn.”⁶⁸ A woman whose children died shortly after birth prepares a meal for the entire village, with “the Persian cooks’ best dairy and fish delicacies”; following the repast, the guests fast and pray that the curse be removed.⁶⁹ These elements create a basis of authenticity for the place and the characters operating in it. At the same time, the unique Jewish cultural element interwoven with the life routine in the Jewish village quarter fits in, as well.

Customs from Jewish Culture as Representative of Authenticity

The months of the year in the novel are numbered in light of the mention of the principal holidays. Thus, “from Passover eve and until the Feast of Pentecost.” Passover in the Iranian Jewish community is considered the beginning of the year, with special importance being associated with it. Preparations for the holiday are many and painstaking: the furniture is moved out of the house, which is burnished with great care for many days. Members of the household eat outside the home during this period, setting up table in the shade of an almond tree. Before entering the house, they must be doubly cautious, shaking out their clothes well to avoid bringing in any crumbs.⁷⁰

Wedding ceremonies in *Omerijan* take place “at the end of the counting of the days of the Omer”; they are conducted by Rabbi Netanel Mulla who writes the *ketubah* as dictated by Jewish law. As is the custom, players of “the thar and the fiddle” perform for the guests at the celebration.⁷¹ The synagogue forms an essential part of the Jewish neighborhood landscape. Alongside the folk beliefs and appealing to the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

fortune teller,⁷² in their personal concerns the neighbors fix their eyes on the rabbi of the village, who is “both matchmaker and traditional scribe.”⁷³

While washing at the bathhouse is similar to local non-Jewish custom, it is also connected with the Jewish custom of immersing oneself in a *mikveh*.⁷⁴

The piquant culinary theme comes to the fore extensively in the novel, both as part of the routine way of life the novel describes, and as an expression of elements connected to Jewish culture. Side by side with Jewish foods typical of the holidays, such as sweets on holidays and celebrations (after terms of marriage are signed, or at a circumcision) and the Sabbath hot meal (*chaulent*) spreading its fragrance throughout the alley, the influence of local culture also makes itself felt. For instance, abundant use of spice herbs, such as the herb called “sabzi” in Persian and customarily placed in generous quantities in the center of the table as a complement to the meal.⁷⁵ Similarly, names of different spices are provided; “nabat,” described as “cubes of glassy sugar,”⁷⁶ or local foods specially appropriate for a wedding, such as “asheresteh,” a dish combining pasta, lentils, and saffron reserved particularly for special celebrations, and “green cooked broad beans (‘ful’)” served at the conclusion of an event as a signal of its coming to a close, as well as “fish and eggs for blessings,” foods influenced by events in the Jewish tradition.⁷⁷ “Shirini,” various kinds of sweets, are mentioned in *Ezri* as foods served at events such as betrothals and weddings, as well as during the requesting ceremony, when the parents of the man pay a special visit to the parents of the young girl in order to ask for her hand. It is also mentioned in *Ezri* in a description of eating as a metaphor for a wedding agreement: “eat and drink sweets.”⁷⁸ Such gestures stem from the best of the Jewish tradition.⁷⁹ *Ezri* adds that at the parents’ meeting, the parents of the man make

⁷² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷³ See, for example, Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 13, 16, 54, 94, for Halachic customary practices which the neighborhood rabbi attends. The rabbi is the one who makes the decisions in matters of matchmaking; for instance, in the match between Nezzi and her cousin Musa (*ibid.*, 182).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57. And see the detailed list of the typical holiday Persian foods also on 186-187 and 193.

⁷⁸ *Ezri*, 40.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Rabbi Y. M. Lau, *Yahadut Halachah le-Maaseh (Judaism: Halachah for Action)*, ed. Shaul Meizelis, Tel Aviv: Modan, 1998), 332, 336, 346.

presents of jewelry to the betrothed young girl, “a few coins of gold and a velvet coat with gold thread.”⁸⁰

Relations between Jews and non-Jews in the Omerijan Neighborhood as a Representation of Reality

The high Jewish population density in the Jewish alley notwithstanding, the Jews live within proximity of non-Jews, and the bond with these last cannot be eliminated. The backdrop of the Jewish neighborhood is shaped by the symbol of Islam—the crescent fixed at the dome of the mosque. In the same way, Jews’ shops are set in the bazaar, and non-Jewish merchants may enter the alley, as the Bahai Shahin does when he arrives in the Jewish quarter selling textiles. He manages to seduce Flora and to marry her, and she only later makes the discovery that Shahin is also married to a Bahai woman. Such a system of relations, brought about by cunning, is expressive of the urge for assimilation which stems from Flora’s yearning to marry the young man she loves; it is also due to the upbringing she has absorbed since a young age, aimed at preparing her for her principal purpose: the role of a married woman. These examples notwithstanding, the relations prevailing between the Jews and the non-Jews—with the children of the latter typically running after Flora and throwing plum pits at her—are highly charged, calling for sensitivity and caution on the part of the minority.⁸¹

The non-Jews usually fix their eyes on Jewish girls, focusing on Nezzi and Flora and making comments meant to seduce and humiliate: “the farmers [...] the peddlers [...] the children, everyone stopped and looked at her.”⁸² This is not all; the non-Jewish men approach a Jewish woman walking alone and hassle her, even rape her.⁸³ Ezri considers the charged bond between Jews and Moslems in Persia, arguing that Jews were regarded as impure in the view of the Moslems “stringently observing matters of purity and impurity”; they were derisively called “Jehud.” He notes that any Jew who touched an item belonging to a Moslem was likely to be stoned by the enraged mob.⁸⁴ His father’s having managed to integrate himself in a branch of the state treasury office provoked jealousy

⁸⁰ Ezri, *ibid.*

⁸¹ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 173.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 147. It appears that Flora’s keeping silent about the matter is a gesture hinting at the helplessness of the Jews as a minority, which would be cast as the aggressor and not as the victim in the course of legal proceedings.

⁸⁴ Ezri, 22.

and complaints from the Moslem employees; Tziyon Ezri was ultimately fired from his position.⁸⁵ The novel *Tracking Her Childhood* also describes the relations between Jews and Moslems in Asfahan: on the one hand, the Moslem neighbors admire the rabbi of the Jewish congregation, Mulla Kunsari, Shlomo Abrahamian. But on the other hand, there are outbursts of hatred and violence: Moslems spitting and raging when the rabbi's young daughter touches the Moslem baker's building with the edge of the loaf of bread she wants to buy.⁸⁶

Overall, relations between the two groups are highly charged, calling for constant vigilance on the part of the Jews as the subjected minority group. Verbal and physical violence is typically unleashed by the Moslems, even in the absence of a justifying pretext for a violent reaction on their part.

Jewish Society in Omerijan as a Closed Society

In light of these considerations, the view that rural Jewish society described in this novel is a closed group becomes doubly understandable: the Jews live in an area whose boundaries are clear for existential reasons. On the one hand, this helps preserve the Jews' safety and their separate subsistence; yet on the other, it also leads to cultural atrophy. Leaving and entering the area are both limited with a view to considerations of gender: the movement is permissible for men, but forbidden for women. Closed existence of this kind limits the opportunity for absorbing new knowledge or information; this explains the way of life determined by superstitious belief.

It appears that the closed mode of existence, the ghetto, is also what is in part responsible for unleashing the violence taking place within the community; this does not skip over the relations between the sexes. Thus, Nezzi's father threatens his wife that if she bears him "another daughter, living or dead, he will kill her and take for himself a new and disciplined wife."⁸⁷ He rapes his wife as she bleeds after a miscarriage, after he "beats, with blows and curses," Mamu, the prostitute who provokes him.⁸⁸ His violent action against women is a forceful expression of his attempting to manage situations which he is not capable of managing, or to meet the challenge of a reality which he is not capable of changing. Women's

⁸⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁶ Matzov-Cohen, *Tracking Her Childhood*, 13, 14, respectively.

⁸⁷ Rabinian, *Almond Tree Alley*, 112.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 116.

violence finds its expression in the attempt to hurt themselves bodily on their own; for instance, when the pregnant women try to harm their future children with the intention of killing them, because of the fear that the unborn child may be female. Thus, Mahsti, who is pregnant, resolves to try for an abortion. In an attempt to speed up her premature labor, she circles about the village wall seven times, and then, upon returning home, drinks “a pitcher [...] filled with apple vinegar.” The harm Mahsti does to herself is double, as she attempts to penetrate her reproductive organs so as to hurt the fetus, and mutilates herself in the process.⁸⁹

Yet another form assumed by women’s violence is the arguing between two midwives about the right to deliver a woman: “quickly did they stretch out their hands to pull and bare their teeth to bite.” A common saying in the Jewish quarter which deals with the admonition against using more than one midwife—lest the newborn’s head be torn off—brings out the cruelty and the violence implicit in what should be a blessed and positive situation.⁹⁰ An instance of a mother’s violence against her daughter—Miriam Chanom against Flora—in order to protect the economic interests of the family and of the daughter in the negotiations conducted for a successful match takes place when Flora is shut up in the matchmaking cellar for a long time. When she finally emerges, she “is soaked with urine [...] and her hands are lacerated in struggles with biting rats’ teeth.”⁹¹

The closed nature of the alley’s Jewish community also finds its expression in the community’s conservatism and its preservation of age-old customs and practices. For instance, the attitude toward women within the community is expressive of the principal purpose of women as this is seen by both women and men, inculcated in them since they first become conscious: a woman must marry in order to bring children into the world, and it is best if her firstborn baby is a male. It turns out that the attitude toward women takes shape vis-à-vis their wombs, which represent them, and the question of the womb’s fruitfulness is destined to make clear what any woman’s status will later be in Jewish society. This is made clear in the novel vis-à-vis all the women characters the novel introduces: Miriam Chanom, Flora, Nezzi, and Mahsti.

Many of the instances of violence by women against themselves or against other women family members are connected to this, and influenced by events having to do with the change in a woman’s status as she goes from being single to being married, as well as with her ability to be fertile

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

and bear children. Thus Goli is called “mother of sons” and “the fortunate mother,” giving birth to her sons at a distance from the women of the alley so as to avoid envy. By contrast, her neighbor Mahsti, also a mother, but one not blessed with sons, is called “mother of daughters.” In order to give birth to sons, she arranges for meals for herself “like the meal she’d seen through her window, of Goli Fesser Zeydeh.” The novel abounds in situations involving a variety of conditions (pregnancies, imaginary pregnancies, miscarriages, and more) representative of the feminine body as a tool and means for giving birth to male sons: the reaction of Mahsti’s husband. He gives her a blow on the head, shouting, “When are you going to give me the males that I want [...] I need a different wife, one who’ll give me sons”.⁹² It becomes evident that the preoccupation with women’s status and relating to women as tools meant to serve men’s interests,⁹³ are led and directed primarily by the women themselves: Miriam Chanom imposes her wishes upon her daughters Flora and Huma, Mahsti mutilates herself in response to social norms, being envious of her neighbor who is a mother of sons and imitating her so as to merit a male son, and so on. This mindset is governed by male hegemony, as Halpern argues,⁹⁴ and comes to the fore in a vociferous and violent way.

Summary

It becomes evident that the Jewish human landscape is reflected in the novel as a reality mixed with moments of humor partaking of both the grotesque and the comic, also buttressed by the duplicity of cultures finding authentic expressions for itself in the novel. These last reflect the way of life common among the Jews in places where they lived in Iran. These were closed places, ghetto-like, and remote from dynamic cultural centers. The characters’ lifestyle evidences an awareness of the double nature of their identity and how this impacts the type of lives they lead. Avi Sagi stresses in this connection that:

[H]uman culture is an inextricable part of human beings themselves, like their faces or their names; it is not additional to their existence as human creatures, for without it they are not human. Human beings are born into culture, not into existence disconnected from culture, and it is culture which establishes their identity as particular beings, also determining their language toward the multitude of setups which they experience as a part of

⁹² Ibid., 114.

⁹³ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁴ Halpern, 184.

existence. Culture provides both memory and its consciousness-related shaping; it also has an important role to play in devising these assessments.⁹⁵

Jewish society described in the novel is closed, true enough. It preserves the Jewish and Halachic way of life. But at the same time, it is not impervious to the influences of Persian culture and its folkloristic heritage; it is not impermeable. The greatest influence by Persian culture has to do with the Jews' preoccupation with the narrow, individual circle of their lives. The Jews lead a life which does not overstep normative bounds, but preserves the traditional cultural mode of being. Besides, social and political issues do not concern them, unlike the Jewish characters described by Ezri who have an agenda of public involvement, both domineering and intensive. The novel's characters are preoccupied with the basic needs they must fulfill if they are to survive economically; they also focus on the narrow life circles of the subject.

On the one hand, the closed nature of the community and its self-imposition of this closing make it possible to preserve the community's special religious character and heritage; yet on the other hand, the community's appeal to local culture makes it possible for it to preserve the status quo vis-à-vis the non-Jews, thus singling it out as a community even in the eyes of the non-Jews making up its milieu.

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⁹⁵ Avi Sagi, *Ha-Mass'a ha-Yehudi-Yisraeli: She'elot shel Tarbut ve-shel Zehut (The Jewish-Israeli Odyssey: Questions of Culture and Identity)*, Jerusalem: The Hartman Institute, 2006), 186.

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