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# Let Me Tell You What It Means: Reading Beyond Humor in Selected Iranian-American Memoirs, Stand-up Comedy, and Film in the Post-9/11 Era

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## ABSTRACT

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Muslims in America have continued to remain the subject of cultural and political debates. In their artistic endeavours, Muslim artists have tried to rectify the negative and mediated images attributed to Islam, Muslims, and their cultures. In this dissertation, I look at Iranian works from the diaspora that not only represent Iranian culture and attempt to raise public awareness in America, but are also steeped in humor as their linking theme. It is humor embedded in socio-cultural and political implications along with cultural representations that constitute my analysis in this dissertation.

I have benefitted from a wide range of textual materials and visual sources—electronic libraries, media coverages, and Internet talks and interviews—to investigate the rhetoric of Firoozeh Dumas’s selected memoirs entitled *Funny in Farsi* (2003) and *Laughing without an Accent* (2005), the stand-up comedian Maz Jobranis’ *Axis of Evil* (2005-2007), and Ramin Niami’s romantic comedy film entitled *Shirin in Love* (2014).

Critical voices of the Iranian diaspora scholars along with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of the carnivalesque, heteroglossia and dialogism, and Linda Hutcheon’s concepts of irony and parody inform the theoretical framework of my study. I suggest that the artworks function as a site where social, cultural, political, and linguistic practices are re-negotiated, re-defined, and re-presented to the reading public and/or audiences.

Keywords: Humor, the rhetoric, the Iranian diaspora, the carnivalesque, heteroglossia, dialogism, irony, parody, cultural representations

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## **INTRODUCTION: Understanding the Texts and Contexts of Iranian-American Humor after 9/11**

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in America not only brought with them the tragedy and loss of many innocent lives, but also called public attention to critical issues concerning security, freedom, and social rights. Concepts such as security and freedom were redefined and reprioritized with respect to the growing fear of terrorism all across America. In their arguments, a number of post-9/11 scholars gave primacy to security over freedom out of the fear of terrorism (Benhabib 2002; Meyers 2008). Meyers argues that public debate on terrorism following 9/11 has been limited to some “speechless shock,” while the significant distinctions between ruthless terrorists, on the one hand, and democratic states, on the other, reduce the chances of participating in a constructive dialogue in the public sphere (45-6). Earlier scholars, however, had placed significant emphasis on individual freedom as the main theme of political controversies and not merely as the theme of abstract philosophical discussions (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992).

However, what is important about the scholars mentioned above is that they put forth competing arguments regarding the definition of meaningful discourses on political, social, and cultural levels. Similar contestations also appeared in the realm of art and artistic endeavours in the post-9/11 era and need to be recognized. To this end, it is important to understand as to whether public gatherings (festivals, concerts, shows and plays), literary works, visual artefacts, and filmic productions can form meaningful discourses by attempting to raise public awareness and creating a space for topical

debates. In this regard, it is important to note what messages are incorporated in artwork productions and what possible inferences are communicated to the audiences.

This dissertation examines the works of the Iranian diaspora that not only represent Iranian culture and attempt to bring awareness to Americans regarding Middle Eastern cultures, but also extensively delve into humor as their linking theme in order to convey their messages to their audiences. Specifically, my thesis benefits from a wide range of textual materials and visual sources – electronic libraries, media coverages, and Internet talks and interviews – to investigate the rhetoric of Firoozeh Dumas’s<sup>1</sup> selected memoirs entitled *Funny in Farsi* (2003) and *Laughing without an Accent* (2005), the stand-up

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<sup>1</sup> A UC Berkeley graduate, Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas started writing her first memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, in 2000. Her book was published in 2003 in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy in America. Dumas’s success came right after her first book was published. Both her memoirs have won a number of awards. The following material comes from Firoozeh Dumas’s personal webpage, which gives an account of her writing career: “Firoozeh grew up listening to her father, a former Fulbright Scholar, recount the many colorful stories of his life. In 2001, with no prior writing experience, Firoozeh decided to write her stories as a gift for her children. Random House published these stories in 2003. *Funny in Farsi* was on the New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle and Los Angeles Times bestseller lists and was a finalist for the PEN/USA award in 2004 and a finalist in 2005 for an Audie Award for best audio book. She lost to Bob Dylan. She was also a finalist for the prestigious Thurber Prize for American Humor, the first Middle Eastern woman ever to receive this honor. Unfortunately, she lost that one to Jon Stewart ... In 2008, Firoozeh published a second set of stories, *Laughing Without an Accent*, which also became a New York Times bestseller. In 2016, she published her first book of middle grade fiction, *It Ain’t so Awful, Falafel*. Her novel has received high praise from readers of all ages. Firoozeh has also written for the New York Times, Gourmet Magazine, Los Angeles Times, and many other outlets. You may have heard her commentaries on National Public Radio. When not writing, Firoozeh is active on the lecture circuit. She has spoken at hundreds of schools, conferences and festivals. She believes that everyone has a story to tell and that everyone’s story counts” (<http://firoozehdumas.com/bio/>, accessed on June 15, 2016).

comedian Maz Jobrani's<sup>2</sup> *Axis of Evil* (2005-2007), and Ramin Niami's<sup>3</sup> romantic comedy film entitled *Shirin in Love* (2014). It is not general humor, though, that links the three artists, but it is the socio-cultural and political implications embedded in humor in conjunction with cultural representations that inform my analysis. I argue that the artworks- memoir, stand-up comedy, and film- function as sites where social, cultural, political, and linguistic practices are re-negotiated, re-defined, and re-presented to the reading public and/or audiences. Since the three genres - autobiographic, performative, and cinematic productions - came out after 9/11, it is important to see what subject matters they try to communicate.

There are two mainstream theoretical frameworks this dissertation benefits from; Linda Hutcheon's concepts of irony and parody, and Mikhail Bakhtin's guiding notions

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<sup>2</sup> A Political Science PhD drop-up of UCLA, Maz Jobrani has been acting and performing stand-up comedy since 1999. The following material comes from his personal webpage: "MAZ JOBRANI is a founding member of The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour which first aired on Comedy Central. He has had three Showtime specials, BROWN AND FRIENDLY, I COME IN PEACE and most recently, I'M NOT A TERRORIST, BUT I'VE PLAYED ONE ON TV. He performs stand-up live around the world, including the Middle East where he performed in front of the King of Jordan. Maz has also performed stand up on THE TONIGHT SHOW and THE LATE LATE SHOW WITH CRAIG FERGUSON. Most recently, Maz starred as the title character in the award-winning indie comedy, JIMMY VESTWOOD: AMERIKAN HERO, a film which he co-wrote and produced. In the Summer of 2015 he played the role of Jafar from Aladdin in the Disney movie, THE DESCENDANTS. With over 50 guest star appearances, Maz can regularly be seen on television's most popular shows. Guest stars include GREY'S ANATOMY, CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM, TRUE BLOOD, and SHAMELESS. He is a regular panelist on NPR's WAIT WAIT DONT TELL ME and has given 2 TED Talks. His LA Times Best Selling Book, I'M NOT A TERRORIST BUT I'VE PLAYED ONE ON TV, was published by Simon & Schuster, and hit shelves in February 2015" (<http://www.mazjobrani.com/bio/>, accessed on July 16, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Ramin Niami majored in film studies at University of Westminster, London. He used to teach filmmaking at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Niami's career in the film industry has not been limited to only one certain area, but he has been engaged in several activities, such as writing, editing, producing, directing, and acting. However, he has taken part in over twenty documentaries, most of which have appeared on U. K's BBC and Channel 4. Documentaries aside, some of Niami's prominent filmic productions are *Somewhere in the City* (1998), *Paris* (2003), *Babe's & Rickey's Inn* (2013), which won the Pan African Film Festival Programmer's Award in 2013. *Shirin in Love* was premiered in 2014 across many cities in America. Of the last two productions, Niami's *Babe's & Rickey's Inn* and *Shirin in Love* are rated 8.6 and 5.2 by IMDB, respectively.

of the carnivalesque, heteroglossia, and dialogism.<sup>4</sup> Besides this twofold thread of theories, I tap into views published by prominent scholars of the Iranian diaspora such as Nima Naghibi, Nasrin Rahimieh, Hamid Naficy, Persis Karim, and Amy Malek to see, firstly, what it means to be Iranian in America and, secondly, how the Iranian diaspora grapples with irony, the carnivalesque, dialogism, and humor in the works under my analysis. I speculate that humor and ironic inferences open up new perspectives towards Iranian culture and contemporary history and create new possibilities for the audiences to understand the Iranian community in America.

Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and heteroglossia suggest that cultural and social efforts can contribute to the formation of meaningful discussions by animating a plurivocality and heterogeneity of voices.<sup>5</sup> In other words, by motivating debates amongst various social classes and cultural groups, including, but not limited to, the privileged/underprivileged, the oppressor/oppressed, the included/excluded, centralized/marginalized/, and the voiced/silenced, we may have the opportunity to build a liberal and democratic sphere where every member of the society enjoys participating actively and complicating other members' views unrestrictedly. In the wake of 9/11, ethnic scholars, artists, and activists of Middle Eastern origin in the U.S found themselves the main subject of discussions about terrorism and security. Hence, in their

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<sup>4</sup> Highly significant concepts such as heteroglossia and dialogism are incorporated into my analysis in all chapters because, as I argue, the artworks attempt to create a space for dialog and mutual understanding between Iranians, as an ethnic minority in America, and Americans, as the mainstream white population in America. Meanwhile, the Iranian community in America is introduced to other ethnic minorities, such as Asians, South Asians, Latin Americans, African Americans, and so forth. Hence, the Iranian diaspora's voice is heard amongst other diasporas that constitute the multicultural and mosaic tissue of American nation.

<sup>5</sup> I believe that Mikhail Bakhtin's views of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" shed light on the voices arising from ethnic and social classes of a society (Bakhtin, 1981: 270-342). For this reason, I have attempted to sum up and draw upon Bakhtin's views as one of the mainstream strands of theory in my thesis.

efforts to challenge the images of Muslims and Middle Easterners in the American media, they found art as a propitious space where they could attempt to rectify the negativities ascribed to Muslims and Islam, on the one hand, and develop public consciousness, on the other. In addition, by integrating their views into their works, the Middle Eastern artists encourage their audiences to read beyond the terrains of the text and words, and obtain messages that lie in the context and beyond the levels of denotation. By way of bringing Linda Hutcheon's concept of irony into my analysis, I argue that hidden and unsaid levels of meanings account for ironic inferences, emerging from the network of the text, context, and interpretations.<sup>6</sup> It is, however, the socio-cultural circumstances that shape the context and, subsequently, the ironic meanings that arise from it. It is, therefore, highly important to understand not only what the Middle Eastern artists have attempted to convey in their artistic endeavors, but also under what socio-cultural circumstances and to whom the communications have been addressed since the events of 9/11.

Among the Middle Eastern artists, Iranian-Americans began to produce artworks in literary, visual, performative,<sup>7</sup> cinematic genres alongside copious academic papers and books<sup>8</sup> that took two distinctive trajectories. By closely examining various works produced by Iranian-American scholars and artists, I surmise that there are two main

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<sup>6</sup> In *Irony's Edge* (1994), Linda Hutcheon proposes distinctive categories and examples of ironic meanings that appear within the contexts and interpretations of the text. I extensively use Hutcheon's theoretical principles in my thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Please, refer to Hamid Dabashi's *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (2001) for further information regarding Iranian cinema, and Sayad's acting performance and comedy.

<sup>8</sup> For further studies about such subjects, please refer to Hamid Naficy's *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Volumes 1-4), *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (1993), *Iran Media Index* (1984), *Film-e Mostanad* (Documentary Film), 2 volumes (1978-79). For Hamid Dabashi, please refer to *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (2001), and finally, for Shahla Mirbakhtyar, please refer to *Iranian Cinema and the Islamic Revolution* (2006).

categories of Iranian-American artists whose works evince specific characteristics. Celebrated visual artefacts produced by diasporic Iranian artists living in America and Europe are Marjane Satrapi's, Shirin Neshat's, and Parsua Bashi's whose cultural productions (graphic memoirs) revolve around themes such as Islam and the West, depiction of Iranian woman in Western media, feminism and Islam, and Islamic Revolution and its impact on Iranian women. Neshat has produced films and held photo exhibitions that also deal with Iranian women's subject formation under Islamic Republic's rule, the theme of which resembles those of her graphic memoir. Besides winning numerous awards, Satrapi's and Neshat's cultural artworks have been translated into different languages and have been in circulation across the world. Parviz Sayad is one of the first Iranian figures and actors whose comedic theatrical performances in America can be grouped under the Iranian diaspora. He was an active actor before the Iranian Revolution and, having relocated himself to America, continued his career as a comedic performer following the Revolution in America. Norma Percy's documentary<sup>9</sup> entitled *Iran and the West* (2009) depicts the 30-year-old relations between Islamic Republic and European and American powers. I have not included this three-part series in my thesis because my focus is mainly on the works produced by Iranian-American artists. Hamid Naficy, Hamid Dabashi, and Shahla Mirbakhtyar have written critical analyses in books on Iranian cinema and the evolution of cinematic productions before and after the Iranian Revolution. Each one of the scholars proposes categories and definitions regarding a variety of subjects, such as Iranian diaspora and cinema, Third World cinemas, and exile and displacement theories.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/iran-and-the-west/> to access the documentary.

Bringing Farzaneh Milani's and Afsaneh Najmabadi's views into her analysis of the autobiographical writings of diasporic Iranian female writers, Nima Naghibi argues that "the autobiographical genre has traditionally been discouraged in Iran, particularly for women" because the stories coming out of the genre "have been perceived as a form of metaphorical unveiling as indecorous as physical unveiling" (*Estranging the Familiar* 224). However, Dumas's writings reflect her personal view regarding political events such the establishment of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the Hostage Crisis.<sup>10</sup> Along with the pre- and post-landscapes of the 1979 Revolution, Dumas's memoirs bring a gendered perspective and lived-experience levels to the genre of autobiography that complicate the traditional male autobiographical writings.

The attention to autobiographical writings has been motivated by the efforts of two groups of diasporic Iranian-American artists in bringing forth the subjects of Iranian culture and history in conjunction with the 1979 Iranian Revolution since and before 9/11. Cultural identity and gender relations also found their ways into cultural productions, particularly autobiographical writings and memoirs produced by the diasporic Iranian woman writers. The first group consists of artists who basically depict the socio-political atmosphere of Iran prior to and following the Iranian Revolution. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Roya Hakakian's *Journey*

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<sup>10</sup> The Hostage Crisis and/or the Embassy Takeover occurred on November 4, 1979, when 52 American diplomats were taken hostage by a group of students supportive of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Hostage Take-over ended on January 20, 1981, after 444 days. All American diplomats were released, yet the Iran-America relations began to deteriorated ever since. Jimmy Carter was the then president of the United States. For further information on the Hostage Crisis, please refer to the following books; Gary Sick (1991). *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan*. New York: Random House; Mark Bowden (2006). *Guests of the Ayatollah: The Iran Hostage Crisis: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam*. New York: Grove Press; Massoumeh Ebtekar, Fred Reed (2000). *Takeover in Tehran: The Inside Story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy Capture*. Burnaby, BC: Talonbooks; Shaul Bakhash (1984). *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*. Basic Books.



*from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), Afschineh Latifi's *Even After All this Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (2005), Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), and Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity* (2005) and *Bathroom* (2001) are only few of the works produced by the first group.<sup>11</sup> This group also bases the setting of their narratives in Iran and draws lines of comparison between Iran and America in order to familiarize their audiences with the past and present social, historical, political, cultural, and economic landscapes of both countries. Almost all the above-mentioned autobiographical writings deal with the events before and after the Iranian Revolution, political turmoil, and social crises.

There is a second group that attempts to rectify negative images attributed not only to Iranians but also to Muslims, Arabs, and other ethnic minorities in their cultural productions. This group includes artists whose works complicate the former group's narratives and as such dispute the mediated imaginary deployed against Iranians and Muslims. Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars* (2007), for example, is one of the works that complicates Azar Nafisi's narrative. Keshavarz argues that Nafisi's depiction of contemporary Iran is naïve and fragmentary, and that the details were not appropriately presented. In an interview, she also acknowledges that in "many books and news reports about Iran," Iranians are depicted as being the "villains and victims."<sup>12</sup>

Hamid Dabashi is yet another Iranian scholar who unveils the flaws in Nafisi's *Lolita* and contends that Nafisi's *Persepolis* escalates the current negative imaginary in the Western media outlets regarding Iranians and Muslims. Dabashi launches a harsh criticism on Nafisi's

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<sup>11</sup> Cultural productions, including visual and filmic genres and documentaries that partially deal with the central theme in this research are mentioned in the footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2007/keshavarz120307.html>

book, arguing that “By seeking to recycle a kaffeeklatsch version of English literature as the ideological foregrounding of American empire, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is reminiscent of the most pestiferous colonial projects,” and labels her as a “native informer and colonial agent.”<sup>13</sup> Seyed Mohammad Marandi, as well, argues that “Nafisi constantly confirms what orientalist representations have regularly claimed,” and goes on to mention that she “has produced gross misrepresentations of Iranian society and Islam and that she uses quotes and references which are inaccurate, misleading, or even wholly invented”(179). Hence, the above-mentioned scholars have critiqued Nafisi’s *Lolita* with respect to the construction of Islam and Iranians in her work. Their major contestation is based on the premise that Nafisi misrepresents Iran and distorts reality, which contributes to the publication and perpetuation of stereotypes and clichés that are deployed against Middle Easterners and Muslims. Farzaneh Milani labels this category of memoir/autobiographical writing “hostage narratives,” that “portray the Iranian woman as a prisoner without parole and reprieve” (*Iranian Women’s Life Narratives* 130). For this reason, the scholars included above tend to argue that the former group of literary works perpetuate the stereotyping of the oppressed Oriental woman.

Nima Naghibi examines a number of autobiographical writings among which Satrapi’s and Nafisi’s also exist. Naghibi asserts that “Satrapi’s text offers a significant intervention in this highly polarized era of East/West relations,” and that the “text plays the increasingly mobilized stereotypes of the Islamic Republic as oppressive and backward against the Western conviction over its progressive liberalism in ways that contest both of these scripts” (224). In regards to Nafisi’s *Lolita*, Naghibi states,

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<sup>13</sup> Hamid Dabashi. 2006. “*Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire*”. Al-Haram Weekly, June 1-7. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm> (accessed January 10, 2016).

... *Lolita* places itself squarely within a conservative, canonical Western literary critical tradition,” discussing further details such as representation of Iran, Iranian women, and “complexities of contemporary Iranian political and social dynamics,” which are hard to be understood by a Western reader. (224)

Given the various responses Nafisi’s text has received, one can argue that it is not necessarily one type of critique that an artwork receives after its publication, but that there are voices that complicate the arguments put forward in the work and encourage the readers to consider alternative perspectives that unfold when reading the texts.

Amy Malek, another Iranian-American, looks at the public performances of the Iranian diaspora in a case study presented in the form of a descriptive and visual report.<sup>14</sup> Malek can be placed in the second group of Iranian-American artists as she tries to illustrate through photos the extent to which Iranians have been successful in establishing their position in America and how much effort they have invested in cultural events such as the New York Persian Day Parade and ethnic festivals. Such events become the objects of Malek’s study in which she investigates the visual representations in the Iranian diaspora in America. She initially mentions a number of scholars like Hamid Naficy, Ali Modarres, and Halleh Ghorashi who theorize the Iranian diaspora by examining pre- and post-Islamic Revolution of 1979. She bases her argument on cultural and historical grounds, and contends that “many of these organizations’ events, including the New York Persian Day Parade, are organized around the ancient Zoroastrian festival of Norooz, the arrival of spring and the end of the dark season” (393). Using images, Malek goes on to further discuss the cultural elements in the Iranian diaspora that have

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning Malek because she prepares a visual report in the form of an article based on observation, photography, and the analysis of visual elements in the Iranian diaspora’s ethnic occasions and festivals. She is one of the few scholars who presents her case study through photos (taken during 4-5 years in a row) accompanied by her close examination of the cultural events organized by the Iranian diaspora in America.

been evolving annually within the community itself (398-406). Meanwhile, Malek explores the cultural diversity among Iranian ethnic groups and incorporates various political and religious thinking grounds she observed during the events into her study. She concludes that the “Iranian American case is illustrative of diaspora communities’ efforts to create a show (quite literally) of their presence in host countries” (409). Malek’s contention on the cultural representations performed by Iranian-Americans in the festivals is noteworthy as

Rather than allow themselves to be represented by others as visitors, Iranian Americans have recently taken to the same streets and fairgrounds used by the ethnic parades and festivals of Irish, German, and Puerto Rican American communities before them, creating self-representations that highlight their cultural value and mark their diaspora communities as legitimate and productive members of American society. (409)

Malek notes that such festivals are organized with the purposes of “educating the American population about Iranian history and culture but also of passing an appreciated Iranian culture and identity on to the second generation, who have experienced post 9/11 hostility, while re-educating those first-generation Iranian Americans who have experienced assimilation” (409-410). Accordingly, Malek prioritizes “educating” the American population and the first generation of Iranians in her report, and concludes that cultural exhibitions and performances raise public awareness about an ethnic minority such as Iranians in America.

Among the second group of artists are Omid Djalili and Max Amini, two actors and stand-up comedians,<sup>15</sup> whose performances primarily dwell upon socio-cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Both Djalili and Amini have gained popularity not only amongst Iranians living inside and outside Iran, but also amongst non-Iranians across the world, and their shows on Youtube can easily be accessed by anyone. However, Maz Jobrani’s stand-up comedy, which is also popular amongst Iranians and non-Iranians, is selected in this thesis because it is the political subject matters, including racism, discrimination, injustice, and security, that are primarily

topics such as cultural differences and common misunderstandings about Arabs and Muslims, Christians and Jews, and a variety of linguistic variations such as different accents of English language practiced amongst Indians, Jamaicans, and South Africans. Djalili, who is an Iranian-British stand-up comedian, began his career in 1995, and has been performing across the world ever since then. His shows touch upon socio-cultural aspects of not only the Iranian diaspora but also marked distinctions between Iranian cultural values and those of American and British cultures. In a humorous manner, Djalili's shows grapple with very serious topics that are hardly addressed openly in public but can freely be discussed on the stage, thanks to the liberty of stand-up comedy performance and humorous license. Despite the fact that Djalili belongs to Baha'i faith and comes from an Iranian Baha'i family, he is himself a minority among the mainstream population of Iranians both inside and outside of Iran, and yet his stand-up comedy openly dabbles in many topics linked to religious beliefs other than those of his. Djalili's performance can also slip under the second group of the artists who have tried to shed light on the culture of Iran and tried to raise the audiences' awareness about differences among diverse ethnic groups in Europe and North America, in particular. Max Amini is an Iranian-American actor and comedian whose stand-up shows have been around since 2002. His comedy performances delineate the distinctions not only between Iranian and American cultures but also among Iranian generations living inside Iran. He mimics accents from across Iran in his shows and talks about generation gaps in Iran, as well as how quickly the Iranian youths inside Iran are being Westernized.

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integrated in his comedy, as well as social and cultural topics, that inform my study of humor. The fact of the matter is that I investigate Jobrani's comedy tour called *Axis of Evil*, which emerged from the unfavorable socio-political atmosphere of the day, following the 9/11 tragic events.

The afore-mentioned artefacts hardly bring humor as their main theme in their literary bodies. And while the stand-up comedic efforts by Djalili and Amini do, the performances do not specifically deal with racial discrimination and racism following the events of 9/11 in America. It is, therefore, the context of 9/11 along with the elements of irony, parody, the carnivalesque, and dialogism embedded in post 9/11 texts that make the works under study in this thesis stand out from the rest of the productions by Iranian artists.

### **I. The Iranian Diaspora: Critical Concepts and Voices**

Diaspora Studies emerged as a “discipline” or “a cutting-edge area of research, alongside studies on transnationalism, globalization, nationalism, and post-coloniality” (Anh Hua 190). However, it is not a simple task to present a unitary and fixed definition of diasporic communities, such as the Iranian diaspora, as there are various contestations and distinctive trajectories offered by scholars of Diaspora Studies. As a pioneer scholar, Asghar Fathi performed one of the early studies on the Iranian communities living in North America and Europe. Fathi compiled a number of essays in a volume entitled *Iranian Refugees and Exiles since Khomeini* (1991). The essays dwell upon a number of issues, including economic status, sociological grounds, and literary productions of Iranian exiles based in Montreal, Germany, and France in the form of demonstrative and photo reports. Interestingly, there is no mention of the term diaspora in this work, while the terms refugee, exile, and immigrant keep repeating. There are yet differences in the notions of the terms as proposed by the scholars in the same work. Acknowledging that reaching a common definition of the Iranian diaspora requires a thorough examination of socio-political, historical, and cultural elements, Nasrin Rahimieh writes, “As political

realities change for Iranians both at home and abroad where Iranians make new homes, communities, and identities, capturing any singular and unified experience of diaspora becomes both complex and problematic” (387).

“Nostalgia” serves as “a key element in any diaspora,” yet Rahimieh asserts that “in the Iranian context this is a complicated overlay that is connected to the experience of rupture that resulted from the 1979 revolution and the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq” (386). Discussing Amy Malek’s in-depth study of New York’s annual Persian Day Parade, Rahimieh argues

In her essay, Malek explores the complex ways that the parade has been framed and shaped since its inception and the ways that different groups and organizations vie for a sense of authenticity and seek to find symbols (flags, floats, etc.) that will help them claim and perhaps renarrate their “Iranianness” in the U.S. context, where ethnic parades symbolize a kind of ethnic legitimacy. (386)

In the context of the Iranian diaspora, Babak Elahi and Persis Karim investigate multiple notions present in the definition of the term:

As Iranians move away from the nostalgia of exile, or revalorize that nostalgia, and as they become American and European ethnics while retaining a link to the past, the term *diaspora* has emerged as a keyword to describe the condition observed by sociologists, analyzed by literary theorists, critiqued by film scholars, and explored by interdisciplinary intellectuals generally about what it is Iranians are and experience as a result of having left Iran. (382)

Hamid Dabashi puts forward a socio-political analysis of the Iranian diaspora in *Theater of Diaspora* (1996), in which he looks at Parviz Sayyad’s performances in detail. He writes, “Before all the post-revolutionary anxieties of the disillusioned diaspora are artistically charted, before all the goblins damned of ‘who lost the Revolution’ are exorcised, it may very well be that this generation of the Iranian artists abroad has led to the next” (xi). Dabashi views the Iranian diaspora as being heavily affected by the Iranian Left who felt disillusioned after the Islamists took over the power. Critical concepts such

as community and difference play key roles in the definition of the exilic Iranian culture as Peter Chelkowski describes Sayyad's theatre "a 'bridge' between Iran proper and diaspora" (Foreword in Dabashi's *Theater of Diaspora*).

Examining the population of Iranians who relocated to Los Angeles before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Georges Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr attempt to present distinctive categories of Iranian immigrants and exiles in a research carried out in 1986; yet their study did not expound the two categories elaborately due to limited census data at the time. However, in a 2010 conference, Bozorgmehr stated that transnational is a more effective term than diaspora because the identity of Iranians based inside and outside Iran is not shaped by notions such as the nostalgia and loss of homeland but are rather influenced by a global cultural identity.

Incorporating statistical data and interviews in his study, Hamid Naficy examined the Iranian community of Los Angeles in 1993. He concurrently performed a rhetorical analysis of the television broadcasting of the time to trace elements of hybridity in the cultural productions. Naficy's study indicates that the Iranian population of Southern California occupies a liminal space between the home and host cultures. Yet, he observes that the Iranian community tends to engage "in political agency in the host society," moving toward "an ethnic minority, not just an exilic community ... hyphenated Iranian-Americans and not just Iranians" in America (196). This liminal space allows for further analysis of Iranian diaspora as an ethnic minority and category. As Naficy maintains,

In this syncretic notion of unity in difference lies the recognition of the specific experiences, cultures, and identities of each *diasporic* or exiled group at the same time that there is an acknowledgment of their shared experience and common positionalities as marginalized peoples. (197)



Considering the case of Montesquieu's Rica, Nasrin Rahimieh examines the reasons for Iranians' immigration in *How to be Persian Abroad?* It is worth mentioning Rahimieh's argument at length;

The reasons for the recent massive exodus from Iran may be intellectual, social, political, or religious. The end result, however, is a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic hybridity. Like Montesquieu's Rica, we find ourselves either in a playful act of cross-dressing, or an oppressive masquerade which threatens to erase our specificities. As one such deterritorialized person, I see myself vacillating between the two poles of embracing my hyphenated identity and scurrying back to the safety and comfort of my Persian heritage. My work as a literary critic is informed by this constant polarity, and it is this propensity for duality, or I should say plurality, that makes me an avid reader of immigrant and exiled Iranian writers. In their creations, especially when they have adopted a second language, I recognize a shared community free of borders and boundaries. Persian immigrant writers may agonize over their apparent loss of language, memory, and identity, but they also write, in a newly discovered language, about their arrival into a community of transcultural writers. (167)

Hence, transculturality and “trans-linguistic hybridity” account for the final stage immigrants arrive at when Rahimieh brings into her analysis personal experiences and observations, not only those of hers but also those of other “exiled Iranian writers.” Since the literature of the Iranian diaspora is addressed to a large population of readers, Rahimieh writes that we may read the literature

[...] for the expressions of Persian identity, but we do it a disservice if we reduce it to a vehicle for cultural preservation. Cultures, like languages, are always in flux. The difference between deterritorialized and territorialized Persian writers is not to be measured in terms of how well they cling onto an essence, but rather in terms of how differently they manipulate and re-work that essence. Neither group can afford to remain static. (167)

It is transculturality, trans-linguistic hybridity, incorporation into America, and the manipulation of the essence that collectively constitute the identity of Iranian characters in Dumas's and Niemi's texts. In other words, it is not only the Persian identity that the readers can follow, but it is rather the re-working and redefinition of Persian identity of immigrants, which is brought to the audiences through the prism of transnationality.

Nasrin Rahimieh discusses the cases of exile among Iranian authors in *A Systemic Approach to Modern Persian Prose Fiction* (1989). Mahshid Amir-Shahy is one of those cases Rahimieh examines in her research. Amir-Shahy is an author who used to live in Europe but returned to Iran after a period of time. Amir-Shahy views “exile as an impediment to her creativity,” even avoiding the use of English terms in her Persian work (17). Despite the fact that Amir-Shahy translated some English works into Persian, “she has systematically avoided linguistic interference in her own creative works” (17). Her works have been translated in English, yet it was not she who performed the task of translation, which, according to Rahimieh, may be “due to the fact that Amir-Shahy does not regard her own expressions in English as ‘authentic’” (17). Amir-Shahy can be compared with Dumas: Firoozeh Dumas’s autobiographies have been translated by several Iranian translators based inside Iran, yet only one of them, named Mohammad Soleimani Nia, approached her via email communications and asked for her permission before he proceeded with the task of translation. Soleimani Nia, however, kept corresponding with Dumas as he was translating the work *Funny in Farsi*, so that his translation would be linguistically and culturally meaningful to the Iranian audiences. Nonetheless, it was not Firoozeh Dumas herself who commissioned an Iranian translator with the task of translation. Like Amir-Shahy whose works have been translated into Persian, Dumas’s were translated into Persian by a number of translators in Iran who eventually rendered different versions of *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without an Accent*. By contrast, the problem or preoccupation of mother tongue is not the stuff of Dumas. This difference lies in the fact that Dumas was raised in America where she spent an extensive span of her life. Dumas, as a result, formed childhood, teenage,

adulthood memories, and a close bond with America. Despite the fact that Dumas frequently delves into her childhood memories from Iran, a large portion of the situations she unfolds deals with her life in America and the challenges facing her family after immigration.

In terms of the task of translating the original texts into Farsi/Persian, it is not only the translation of the texts that matters, but also the cultural translation that is accompanied by the literary translation. In other words, the Iranian works produced outside of Iran introduce the culture and, more importantly, the Iranian diaspora as an identifiable community through the medium of art. Therefore, the translated works in English provide the target audiences with the knowledge of the culture of the Iranian communities.

Assuming poetry as an effective vehicle that combines political, cultural, and psychological sensibility of being an exile or an outsider after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Persis M. Karim examines Iranian American poetry closely and extends her analysis to other genres such as memoir. She writes,

This ‘outsiderness’ has lessened somewhat with the passage of time. Throughout the 1990s and the early part of this decade, the pain and discomfort expressed in the poetry of the immigrant generation evolved into the more cosmopolitan analysis and comic irony found in the memoirs, essays, and somewhat more hip poetry of the American-born/raised generation; Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad*, Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*, or Mariam Salari's *Ed McMahon is Iranian* are examples of this trend. (*Charting the Past and Present* 112)

Nonetheless, Karim continues that Iranian American poetry has lately “resumed some of its ‘exilic’ and political tendencies,” especially after September 11 when the “tensions” between Iran and America “intensified” (112).

Hamid Naficy recognizes exile as “a process of becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent, and incorporation into the dominant host society that can be partial or complete” (*The Making of Exile Cultures* 8-9). Placing Karim’s and Naficy’s views of exile into the contexts of Dumas’s and Niami’s works, I surmise that the Iranian characters such as Firoozeh and Shirin occupy a space where they feel comfortable. However, while Firoozeh’s parents may still seem to have retained their emotional attachments with their homeland, Shirin’s parents seem to have incorporated in the mainstream population of America. Hence, within the first generation of immigrants, there may exist strong feelings for the homeland, while such notions are not definitive of all first generation of immigrants. However, the case of second generation of immigrants differs from the first one because in comparison to their parents, Firoozeh and Shirin think of America as their home, and it seems they have left the “period of liminality” behind. In other words, the experiences of being an exile are complex and vary from one generation to another or even across the same generation of immigrants. Given the social status of Firoozeh’s family and that of Shirin’s, I suggest that economic prosperity speaks to the comfort and even success of an immigrant family in adopting America as home. While Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without an Accent* depict long-lasting challenges facing her parents from which they have not yet relieved, Shirin’s parents who have also lived in America for a long period of time do not feel nostalgic, nor in between the two nationalities. English language is not an obstacle for Shirin’s family as her mother, Maryam, speaks the language fluently and runs a fashion magazine in Los Angeles, while Firoozeh’s parents still do not speak the language properly. Therefore,

within the Iranian diaspora in America, it is difficult to assert that the first generation of immigrants do not feel at home or that the second generation is more successful than the first one.

## II. Irony and Dialogism: From the Modern to the Postmodern

As J. A. Cuddon examines functions of irony, asserting that irony has multiple functions. It is often “the witting or unwitting instrument of truth. It chides, purifies, refines, deflates, scorns and sends up. It is not surprising, therefore, that irony is the most precious and efficient weapon of the satirist” (461). Despite the fact that Plato and Socrates used irony in their works and Roman rhetoricians viewed it as a rhetorical device, irony took its modern shape in the early eighteenth century when it was compared to scorn and mockery (458). German Romantics gave an intellectual spin to irony by considering it as a way of thinking that impacts the writer’s sadness, alienation, and loneliness. In such a context, there is a tension between the art and artist who is at liberty to play with a set of contradictions. Friedrich Nietzsche has extensively contributed to the modernist view of irony by investigating the entire concept of life as being ironic, which presents itself in disguised, arranged, and double-edged forms.<sup>16</sup> In *The Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth differentiates between the latent meaning that is to be interpreted and the surface meaning in a stable irony. Yet, because there are infinite significations, Booth contends that the reader needs to aim for a genuine re-invention (6). With regards to inaccessibility of truth and absurdity of the world in unstable irony, Booth acknowledges that the only sure affirmation is the negation that begins all ironic plays:

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<sup>16</sup> See *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Twilight of the Idols*. Irony in Nietzsche’s view is bound to be unmasked.

“this affirmation must be rejected,” leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (...) is inherently absurd, all the statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really “mean what it says” (240-241). Booth then asserts that there is no definitive signification or truth, which is the main view in the postmodern intellectual attitude. However, identifying an ironic meaning from any subjective point of view, in Kenneth Burke’s view, can lead to “relativism,” in which “there is no irony” (512).

Burke contends that subjective relativism carries with it closure to the text, while an ironic text is not amenable to the act of closure, but remains open-ended to multiple significations. Burke, as well, explains that relativism occurs when the interpreter gives prominence to one single “position alone” over other positions or perspectives in the work, whereas irony encourages the consideration of all possible perspectives that contribute to the act of meaning production (512). The negotiation of the stated and intended meanings thus remains open to more arguments when the rejection of the stated is not favored. It is the interplay between two or more possible meanings that defines irony, and also it is the interpreter’s task to identify the meanings that do not derive from subjective perspectives.

Alan Wilde proposes the concept of medial irony and disjunctive irony. The former looks at the restoration of completeness to a fragmented world, while the latter “both recognizes the disconnections and seeks to control them . . . and so the confusions of the world are shaped into an equal poise of oppositions: the form of an unresolvable paradox” (10). This is a modern definition of irony to which there is closure and final

reality. However, Wilde argues that postmodern irony is “suspensive” and is loaded with uncertainties.

Modernist endeavors aside, irony in postmodern literary thinking is equipped with the concept of intertextuality, which appears in the social scenes where communication is a key factor. To address irony in the (literary) postmodern, I rest the mainstream argument of this dissertation on Wayne Booth’s and Linda Hutcheon’s notions of irony. Booth differentiates between the surface and latent meanings, and as a result, presents a point of departure, especially when he stresses the idea of infinite meanings or ironies. Bakhtin’s dialogism aligns itself with Booth’s idea of infinite meanings. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), Bakhtin writes that dialogism is an “internal” property of “the word,” “speech,” and “utterance” that “penetrates” the “entire structure” of dialogue (279). Bakhtin distinguishes a “double-voiced” property for “prose discourse ... which grows organically out of a stratified and heteroglot language,” which “cannot fundamentally be dramatized or dramatically be resolved (brought to an authentic end)” (326). Dialogism, therefore, carries with it a double-voicedness that cannot be confined to “the frame of a mere conversation between persons” or “verbal exchanges possessing precisely marked boundaries” (326). To elaborate on his view of dialogism, monologism, and heteroglossia, Bakhtin maintains that,

dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue. (426)

Heteroglossia, in this sense, is “other socio-ideological languages” that emerge “in the speeches of characters” and in the interaction of “social dialects” not merely points of

view (287). Hence, the languages of social groups and classes converge and clash dialogically, and there is no closure to reading the text. The “centripetal forces and tendencies” work in the direction of “unitary language” or ideologies, while “centrifugal forces” work in an opposite direction in order to “decentralize” and “disunify” the former “unitary” ideas and ideologies (271-272). Bakhtin argues that “Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear” (272). The centralizing/decentralizing and unifying/disunifying tendencies of speech, therefore, lie in the utterances and words of speaking subjects. Similarly, Linda Hutcheon examines the underlying or latent meanings in discourse, disseminating from social and cultural circumstances or contexts of the text. Ironic communications are identified when the reader, coming from a different socio-cultural background attempts to unmask the meanings. Correspondingly, Hutcheon proposes categories that speak to the distinctive aspects and functions of irony. She looks at both denotation and connotation. She contends that literal meaning should not be rejected for the “ironic or real meaning of the utterance” (60). Hutcheon terms this aspect of irony the inclusive. Hutcheon argues that it is the interpreter/reader that identifies the ironic meaning in the context (11). She calls this aspect of irony the relational, which helps the interpreter/reader engage in an interplay of ironic meanings. It is the interaction of text, context, and interpreter from which irony “occurs” (58). Hutcheon’s view also places emphasis on the discourse and relates it to the context and communicative activities in which ironic meaning is decided. Double or multiple inferences may occur together where the unsaid concepts challenge the said concepts. This aspect of irony is the differential (60). Additionally, Hutcheon looks at parody and humor, which benefit



extensively from irony. However, she advises that the interpreter may not grasp the intended ironic inference, which runs the risk of misinterpretation. This last specificity is also directly linked to the spirit of my research that addresses humor to a great extent. Other than aspects of irony, Hutcheon defines functions of irony she names as the “ludic,” the “assailing,” and the “aggregative” (48-55). These functions have certain properties that are deployed in satire and parody. The assailing function carries multiple perspectives that may render a bitter critique or apply satire to rectify a range of values. The ludic function of irony assumes a light-hearted and mild teasing role that holds a combination of humor and wit in stock. Since this last function employs pun and metaphor, it is criticized of carrying an undertone that is non-committal and distanced (49). Yet, the multiplicity of voices and responses that irony induces attest to its multi-functional and multi-faceted property. Overall, Hutcheon’s framework views irony as a rigorous rhetorical trope that spans across a wide spectrum of literary considerations.

### **III. Irony, the Interpreters, and Interpretations**

Booth contends that “ironic reconstructions depend on an appeal to assumptions, often unstated, that ironists and readers share” (33). With regards to readers’ shared assumptions, Booth asserts that the readers must have the tendency “to reject the intended meaning,” and that the reader must be “unable to escape recognizing either some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else he knows” (10). In addition to stressing the roles of ironists and readers, Booth also looks at certain contradictory components in the text, such as an “inconsistency in the statements of a speaker that “betrays ignorance or foolishness” and a “conflict between the beliefs expressed and the beliefs we hold and suspect the author of holding” (73, 57).

Booth takes into account a set of shared characteristics that exist in ironic texts, whereas Hutcheon has a vested interest in the “scene,” in her view, that amounts to a historical and cultural context (4). Such a context is, in fact, a “social and political scene” that serves “as part of a communicative process” (4, 12). As Hutcheon argues, irony occurs in the “discourse” and thus “semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution” (17). In other words, the text and context together reveal the ironic meaning, not the text per se. Hutcheon also looks at “discursive communities” that “provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony” (18). Discursive communities comprise target audiences or interpreters who unearth the ironic meanings. By bringing ironists and interpreters together in such discursive communities, Hutcheon observes that “it is the overlapping of some of the communities of ironist and interpreter that sets the stage for the transmission and reception of intended ironies” (20). Therefore, ironic meaning cannot be attained if the text is not exposed to discursive communities that carry shared knowledge or assumptions. What this means is that it is the discursive communities that make it possible for irony to happen as they share and exchange a set of cultural values and beliefs. Relatedly, the communicative processes involve

a set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings; which specify who can claim to initiate (produce, communicate) or know (receive, understand) meanings, about what topics under what circumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why). (94)

As the circumstances under which the interpreters capture meanings constantly shift and take new turns, Hutcheon affirms that discursive communities are “continuously and rapidly reconfigured” (83). As such, Hutcheon states that “irony does not so much create ‘amiable communities’ as itself come into being in ‘contact zones’ as the social spaces

where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (89).

The elements that shape irony are “its critical edge; its semantic complexity; the ‘discursive communities’ that ... make irony possible; the role of intention and attribution of irony; its contextual framing and markers” (4). This means that, first, irony occurs during dynamic communicative strategies, and; second, the interpreter should not favor “binary either/or terms of the substitution of an ironic for a literal meaning” (64). Therefore, Hutcheon refuses the practice that aims for the acceptance and/or rejection of an ironic meaning, and instead proposes the possibility of perceiving irony “as a process of communication that entails two or more meanings being played off, one against the other. The irony is in the difference; irony makes the difference. It plays between meanings, in a space that is always affectively charged, that always has a critical edge” (105). Yet, what is “a critical edge” and what role does it play in irony?

Hutcheon states that irony is a “semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with an evaluative edge” (89). Ironic meaning is thus identified on relational, differential, and inclusive levels (60). That is, irony manifests itself through the semantic challenge between denotative or manifest meaning and connotative or manifest meaning. The same approach can also be applied to irony used in parody.

#### **IV. Irony and Parody**

In terms of parody, Hutcheon considers that irony is charged with semantic and pragmatic levels. While the former emerges from the difference between denotation and connotation, the latter relates to the evaluative or critical function. By discussing the

pragmatic level and relating it to satire, Hutcheon proposes that irony has an “edge” that is concerned with “the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude” (41). Thus, Hutcheon suggests that irony is intimately affiliated to human emotions and notions. With these in mind, I argue that irony is a rigorous rhetorical trope that invites the audiences to actively participate in deciphering ironic meanings in the texts I choose to examine.

The key players, then, are those who compose the irony, that is, the ironist, and the interpreter who interprets the irony. The interpreter’s task is to identify an ironic statement and its ironic meaning (11). In doing so, the interpreter acts within a certain context and performs a process, which in Hutcheon’s terms involves three aspects:

Irony is, first, relational as it happens between people, between text and reader, and between different meanings. This property of irony contributes to the production of novel and critical judgment. The inclusiveness of irony encompasses double or multiple meanings all at the same time, where there is no need “to reject a ‘literal’ meaning in order to get at what is usually called the ‘ironic’ or ‘real’ meaning of the utterance” (60). Here, ironic meaning does not merely result from plain antiphrasis or inversion of meaning. Finally, it is the differential aspect of irony, bringing together multiple yet different concepts where “the unsaid is other than, different from the said” (60).

## **V. Irony in the Texts and Contexts**

Hutcheon thus puts forward a network shaped by the artist, the text, the audiences/readers/viewers/interpreters. She asserts that irony is a “culturally shaped process” that is “made possible by the different worlds to which we belong, and the

different expectations, assumptions and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse in use” (Hutcheon 85). Both Dumas’s memoirs are translated into Farsi, while they were originally written in English. Keeping Hutcheon’s concept of “discursive communities” in mind, then, Dumas’s are read by both Iranian and American readers, whose perception of Iranian and American cultures is different. Iranian and American interpreters, therefore, bring to the texts their expectations of Iran and America, and what they confront when reading may live up to or contradict their expectations. In Niemi’s film, as well, the presuppositions and assumptions that American audiences have regarding the Iranian culture may not be necessarily consistent with what they observe and find out in *Shirin in Love*. Even an Iranian audience may not approve of all cultural elements they come across the film and visual representations of the culture. Considering that, one can argue that what the reader experiences is restricted to the culture of Iranians in that particular region and community in America, and that cultural representations cannot be taken to be true of all Iranians living in Iran and in America. To be precise, the film touches upon a large number of cultural elements within the Iranian diaspora of Los Angeles, such as family ties, dating and marriage, nudity, social status and career achievement, and freedom of choice that can be grasped differently by interpreters coming from different cultural communities and backgrounds. Multiple interpretations, in this regard, attest to the idea of “conceptual map,” as put forward by Stuart Hall, and “discursive communities” that render various versions of reading in the face of the texts (Hall 18, Hutcheon 89-115). Applying Hutcheon’s notion, I argue that it is the expectations and unsaid meanings in the film and its contexts that build toward the ironic inferences (Hutcheon 58-60). In my analysis of Dumas’s,

Jobrani's, and Niami's artworks, all these unsaid meanings and inferences are unveiled by way of classifying different ironic meanings that may approve or disapprove of a subject matter, such as religious and cultural practices. The unsaid meanings account for ironic discourses, which lay a special emphasis on the interconnectedness of all utterances, past and present (58-60). Irony in this sense is not categorized under the simplistic definition of the opposite of what is said, but it is a double-voiced discourse that produces manifold unsaid meanings in an utterance.

In the above-mentioned texts, I also dwell upon discourses that convey different meanings at the same time. I negotiate and re-negotiate all these ironic inferences with the texts and contexts to provide as many meanings as possible. According to Hutcheon, irony is defined as a “semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings – and in doing so with an evaluative edge” (89). With respect to various social, cultural, historical, and political contexts embodied in the texts, I differentiate the types of communication that occur in each context. For example, I compare and contrast the education systems in Iran and America, cultural values of both societies, and the political atmospheres before and after the 1979 Revolution, 1979 Hostage Crisis, and 9/11 Terrorist attacks, in order to highlight layers of meanings incorporated in Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*. Dumas's *Laughing without an Accent*, too, integrates socio-political and cultural concerns into its plot in a humorous way. Pre- and post-Iranian Revolution eras are depicted through the eyes of Firoozeh, as in *Funny in Farsi*. One may argue that this memoir is a sequel to Dumas's *Funny in Farsi* because in many ways the episodic plot and similar situations keep coming back in this book. However, the significant difference between the two memoirs is that the naïve character

and reporter in *Funny in Farsi* is a grown-up mother in *Laughing without an Accent* who continues to narrate the remaining episodes in Firoozeh's life history.

## VI. Carnival and the Carnavalesque

In Jobrani's stand-up comedy, I first try to trace elements of the carnivalesque in the discourse and performance of the *Axis*, and then examine how ironic inferences are communicated in Jobrani's shows. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin defines the carnival as "a pageant without footlights and without division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act" (122). In a similar vein, the *Axis* aligns itself with the characteristics in a pageant, as there is no distance between Jobrani and his audiences. In addition, this carnival act is "not contemplated...and not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life*" (122). The *Axis*, too, follows an impromptu manner of speech, in which Jobrani moves from one topic to another. In a carnival, a number of conventions were suspended, such as "the hierarchical structures and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette," as well as "all the distance between people" in a way that the final outcome is the "free and familiar contact among people" (123). By the same token, Jobrani's shows accommodate a large group of audiences who convene in halls, regardless of their social classes. Jobrani's informal language, as well, helps reinforce the informal atmosphere among the audiences, which is one of the common characteristics of stand-up comedies. Laughter is one of the key elements of the carnival, as explained by Bakhtin in *Rebels and His World* (101), which is normally linked to the idea of the overthrow and inversion of authority. Jobrani's *Axis* also takes advantage of the liberty granted by stand-up

comedy license and targets hegemonic hierarchies and political figures through the use of jokes and laughter. Although one may argue that the *Axis* cannot effect any social change, it creates the possibilities among the audiences to look at the world in a different way. The audiences are encouraged to rethink their attitudes towards the subjects like racial discrimination, justice, equality, social rights, and respect for all ethnicities as presented in Jobrani's performance, even though temporarily. The essentials in a carnival, the boisterous crowd, the world turned upside down, the comic mask, and the grotesque body are to be mentioned (Hyman 14-17). However, there is no such thing as a boisterous or joyous crowd in Jobrani's *Axis*, except the large number of spectators who gather in the same place and laugh together at the serious topics Jobrani humorously delves into in his shows. As to the comic mask, the *Axis* benefits from the humorous license and the stand-up comedian himself wears the mask of a fool, metaphorically, who uncovers the truth, no matter how sad and bitter it is. In terms of the grotesque body, one should note that sexual imagery and the depiction of genitals was an important tradition in the carnival (25-26), which are missing in Jobrani's performance. However, it can be argued that the exaggerated body gestures and gesticulations that Jobrani makes during his shows have replaced the notion of the grotesque body. By way of funny body gestures, in fact, Jobrani sets out to reinforce the subversion and inversion of power structure in his shows.

Hertzler (1970) examines cultural implications carried through humor, conceding that each culture possesses its specific

distinctive social, economic, political and intellectual history; its own fundamental values; its own distinctive social codes – folkway, mores, manners, customs, conventions, and laws; its own logic; its own ideology ... its own peculiar complex



of social institutions in large part setting the behavior patterns of its people in almost every department of life. (50)

Therefore, when investigating humor in art from a certain geographic territory, one needs to restrict his or her study to the ethnic cultural and social practices that are specific to the region and its people. For instance, political jokes are classified under topical humor because they concern subject matters that are not personal, and thus, a political joke is “not universally considered to be in good taste by all members of the society, for it deals explicitly with certain beliefs held by only a portion of the society” (Mulkay 85-86). The topics touched upon in political humor are directed at specific issues and are not as neutral as those in general humor. This means that political jokes circulate among the people who are familiar with the contexts of the jokes, which are shared within their communities. However, Jobrani’s stand-up comedy possesses a wider spectrum by exceeding the limits of a single ethnic group and drawing upon current affairs and socio-cultural and political issues, which require the audiences to have some degree of familiarity with the topics.

By comparison, Dumas’s memoirs demarcate and delineate pre- and post-Iranian Revolution periods and provide the readers, whether informed or uninformed, with helpful insights into political, social, cultural, and historical circumstances by which the texts and readers can communicate. Niemi’s *Shirin* sketches the diasporic community of Iranians in Los Angeles and reflects the diasporic culture as a hybrid practice of both Western and Eastern lifestyles. However, it is the cultural representations of the Iranian community alongside ironic meanings that are brought to light in this thesis. It is in the interaction of text, context, and the interpreter that irony and humor occurs (*Irony’s Edge* 58), which is investigated in this thesis.

To this end, I address the following research questions: First, what rhetorical tropes and discursive practices are strategically chosen by Iranian-American authors and performers to make humor work for serious ends? Second, what levels of interpretation emerge when the texts are studied in relation to the various contexts? And third, what ethical ends do the works promote through the use of humor?

I address these questions in three chapters that discuss two memoirs, a stand-up comedy, and a film produced by the Iranian-American artists. These are analyzed with respect to the contexts from which they have emerged. Chapter one engages in the investigation of Dumas's memoirs regarding the concepts of irony and dialogism as put forth by Hutcheon and Bakhtin. The critical reception and circulation of the memoirs as reflected in a number of reviews and critiques performed by scholars and reviewers inside and outside of Iran are also incorporated in this chapter. Possible levels of signification and/or ironic inferences are unpacked in Dumas's life writing genre based on the critics' responses to the texts. Dumas's talk and interviews also help me obtain a better understanding of the author's viewpoints as echoed by Firoozeh, the narrator of her autobiographies. Chapter two examines Maz Jobrani's stand-up comedy, which deploys elements of the carnivalesque in the performative genre. Ironic inferences, parody, and the elements of the carnivalesque in Jobrani's shows are investigated in this chapter. Chapter three looks closely at the visual and textual elements that inform the cultural representations and ironic inferences in Nimai's film, *Shirin in Love*. Hutcheon's irony as a guiding principle alongside Stuart Hall's and Michel Foucault's critical concepts of cultural representations and discourse shape the theoretical frameworks applied to Nimai's cinematic genre. Finally, the conclusion very briefly dwells upon a summary of

the afore-mentioned chapters, but proceeds to propose the idea of “Respect for the Other through Dialogism,” regarding the creative elements of the three genres. Bakhtin’s dialogism and heteroglossia along with other scholars of rhetoric and humor shape my contention in this section. I argue that humor, with its social, cultural, and political undertones, can provide a space for the achievement of a dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect among diverse groups of audiences. In addition, critical notions such as “invitational rhetoric” and “narrative imagination,” as put forward by Foss and Griffin, and Martha Nussbaum, are implemented to show how the works attempt to increase the possibilities of empathizing and sympathizing with various Iranian characters and/or members of the Iranian diaspora.

## **VII. Reading Between and Beyond the Texts and Contexts**

Regarding the purpose of humor, it is important to note what points of view various scholars bring forth when analyzing humor. While humor for some scholars is aimed towards entertaining people (Koziski 1984), for other comedians, it is “[...] less interesting, even less important than their role as a comic spokesperson, as a mediator, an ‘articulator’ of our culture” (Mintz 75). As one investigates the tropes of humor more closely, he or she can better understand the intention of the comedian or the artist who benefits from humor to communicate a subject matter. Therefore, there is an intimate connection among the artist, the work and the audiences in this sense. For this reason, then, humor is viewed as a “social phenomenon” that encourages the readers to reach after the critical factors that have raised certain debates (Martin 5). Shedding light on particular social, cultural and political behaviors, humor can expose the shortcomings and limitations that might have remained unsaid or neglected. As discussed by humor

scholars such as Schmidt-Hidding (1963), Peterson and Seligman (2004), and Ruch (1998), humor unveils a certain life style and mode of behavior in relation to a particular people. Depending on the factors of time and culture, humor is appreciated in the era and locale of its generation. In the case of American humor, Walker posits that there is a correlation between American democracy and American humor, asserting

[...] because the ideals embodied in the promises of democracy are just that - ideals and not necessarily realities - a great deal of American humor, whether overtly political or not, has pointed to the discrepancies between the grand promises of equality, prosperity, and fulfillment and the actualities of socioeconomic class differences, discrimination, and corruption. (8)

For this reason, racism, discrimination, cultural differences, injustices, and freedom are the main subjects of American humor. Yet, to obtain a better understanding of humor and aspects of it, one needs to approach modes of humor and figures of speech first.

Given the countless works that have been produced by Iranian scholars and artists since 9/11, one may ask, “What do the humorous works under my analysis try to show?” “What aspects of humor do they unfold for the audiences?” “Does humor, as embedded in the works, make serious cultural, social and political issues more appealing to the audiences?” And, finally, “Does humor do something special that non-humorous works do not afford to undertake?” The answers to all the questions above lie in the strategies and techniques Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* (2003) and *Laughing without an Accent* (2005), Jobrani’s *Axis of Evil* (2005-2007), and Niami’s *Shirin in Love* (2014) incorporate. Accordingly, I first look at humor from multiple perspectives and then go on to discuss what aspects of humor –irony, parody, and the carnivalesque – each work unfolds.

## **VIII. Modes of Humor**

In general, there are three major frames of theory, namely, Superiority, Tension Release, and Incongruity, that give definitions of humor and try to explain its mechanism from philosophic, psychological, and linguistic points of view. I try to explain each of these theories very briefly first, and then argue what my research proposes.

### **1. Superiority Theory**

The Greeks saw humor coming from a sense of superiority to others, which also carried with it mockery and ridicule (Morreal 1997). Quoting Aristotle, Berger (1987) argues that “comedy is based upon an imitation of men worse than average,” and that Thomas Hobbes in *The Leviathan* writes that “The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (7). Similarly, Superiority Theory comprises a set of techniques, such as self-deprecation, aggression, and disparagement in its dealing with an individual as the subject of accolade and praise while the other as the object of mockery and joke (Gutman & Priest, 1969; Stocking & Zillmann, 1976; Zillman, 1983; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). One can contend that Dumas’s recollection of her family’s early failure in adjusting to the culture in America and the series of plight they tackle may count as self-depreciation and disparagement of Iranian diaspora in America. By the same token, Maz Jobrani’s stand-up comedy critiques politicians, ordinary people, and also reveals the downsides of everyday life in every culture and, by doing so, his shows carry aspects of self-deprecation. However, one should not forget that stand-up comedy is a variety of American humor, with which comes self-criticism. According to Peterson and Seligman, “Good humor was the sovereign attitude of exposing oneself to the criticism and mockery of others” (586).

As to Dumas's memoirs, it can be argued that it is not the act of humiliating only that the texts employ as a technique, but there is also the praise of Iranian culture, extolment of family bonds, and respect for all Iranians and Americans that shape the structure of both works. Both Dumas and Jobrani may seem to set correctives that can be applied to both Iranian and American cultures. Combs and Nimmo cite Aristotle's analysis of humor and concur that mocking human errors was "not productive of pain or harm to others," but it encouraged the audiences to attend to the follies that required correction (6). The sort of self-mocking that occurs in the memoirs is only a technique that is commonly practiced in American humor.

## **2. Tension Release Theory**

In his development of the theory, Freud looks at certain elements like sexual drives and aggression, and asserts that jokes lead to "the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way" (101). One should, however, note that the obstacle Freud is discussing is concerned with the adjustment of humans to social norms and, rather, prohibitions. Humor arises from the liberty and pleasure one finds in the absence of social restrictions. In other words, laughter serves as a safety valve or outlet for the release of psychological tension, especially that of sex and violence (Morreal, 1983; Brooks, 1992; Martin, 2007). One may argue that Dumas's autobiographical writings can be related to this aspect of theory because, by way of producing her memoirs, she portrays the hardships following her immigration to America. On the one hand, she finds the art of writing a safety valve or a refuge by which she can release part of the tension she has been carrying along, on the other. Nevertheless, this might be a simplistic reading of Tension Release theory in Dumas's

works because sexual drives and aggression are missing in her memoirs. Although at some points when Dumas delineates and demarcates the atmosphere in America shortly before and after the Iranian Revolution,<sup>17</sup> she partially depicts violence on the streets of America, which was stirred up by the demonstrators opposing the Shah regime. Additionally, Dumas's writing concerns a group of Iranians who are against the other group in America, and it is not Americans beating up Iranians on the streets. Yet, one can also argue that Dumas depicts how Americans treated Iranians after the Hostage Crisis in 1979, when the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and its clerks were taken hostage by a group of Iranians for 444 days. Dumas shows how hard it was for her family and many other Iranian immigrants to get a job in America and how hostile the American public turned against all Iranians at the time.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the genre of autobiography provides Dumas with an opportunity to reopen a set of pleasant and unpleasant chapters of her life, and it is not necessarily the Tension Release theory that works through her memoirs. Jobrani takes advantage of humor by disrupting the socio-cultural inhibitions and mocking social hierarchies. Both theories above can be observed in the play when rigid cultural practices and dominant socio-political norms are humiliated and derogated in favor of a moment of relief and laughter.

### **3. Incongruity Theory**

This theory deals with the linguistic realm when two disparate ideas turn out to have a surprising relationship, which provokes witty thought and humor. In simpler

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<sup>17</sup> The chapter "I Ran, and I Ran, and I Ran" in *Funny in Farsi* shows the altercations between the two groups in America and some aspects of violence.

<sup>18</sup> In *Laughing without an Accent*, there are two chapters called "Encore, Unfortunately" and "444 Days," which specifically depict the post-Hostage Crisis atmosphere in America. *Funny in Farsi*, as well, contains a chapter called "Bernice," in which Dumas shows some Americans use bumper stickers, the content of which was insulting to the Iranians in America.

terms, the theory refers to the humor that stems from a “difference between what one expects and what one gets, a lack of consistency and harmony” (Berger 8). The use of puns and wordplay, which bears a mismatch between what the audiences expect and what they see, is one of the significant aspects of the theory Morreall (1997). Despite the fact that the theory still needs further explanation, according to Ritchie 2004 (as cited in Martin 2007), it is widely used amongst scholars who study humor.

The word-play occurs in Dumas’s memoirs when, for example, in *Funny in Farsi* she names a chapter “I Ran, I Ran, I Ran.” The title is a word-play, which may also suggest Iran when the letters are positioned next to each other. It is also worth noting that the content of this chapter deals with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and how a pro-Shah group of visitors clashes with an anti-Shah group. Dumas’s story in this chapter takes place during the time the Shah was still in power and on a trip to America. Furthermore, when recounting her memories after her family moved to America, Dumas also confronts the audiences with unexpected situations, such as Americans’ hostility to Iranians after the Revolution and the Embassy Takeover. There are yet more situations Dumas brings to the fore such as integration into the host culture and estrangement following immigration, which are both insightful and upsetting for the American reading public.

Jobrani’s title of his stand-up comedy, *Axis of Evil*, is a phrase that makes a parodic reference to George W. Bush who called Iran, Syria, and North Korea the members of Axis of Evil.<sup>19</sup> However, the audiences’ expectations do not live up to what they experience in Jobrani’s comedy. In one of his shows,<sup>20</sup> Jobrani talks about politicians and

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<sup>19</sup> George W. Bush’s account of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as three nations comprising an ‘Axis of Evil’ in State of the Union on January 29, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCBQzCD5QMU> (accessed on November 15, 2015).



how they make important decisions for a nation when under the influence of drugs, and also how important decisions are made by ignorant politicians. The way Jobrani opens his comedy and directs his critique at political figures is very striking because the audiences might not expect him to use terms such as “addicts,” “opium,” and “F words” in his show. This may lead the audiences to laugh at the contradictions between what they had expected to hear and what they hear subsequently in the show. Sudden laughter at serious subject matters can also encourage the audiences to think how critical the current strained relations between Iran and America have become due to the politicians’ incompetency.

#### **IX. Reading the Contexts in the Texts**

In the context of the modern history of Iran, the Iranian Revolution presents itself as the genesis of a spate of migrant writings in the past four decades. Many Iranian artists and authors based in the West today have engaged in writing memoirs and autobiographies to echo their lived experiences during and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Interestingly, the voices that have emerged out of the context of Iranian Revolution have been quite miscellaneous. Among the voices that are prominent, it is the second generation of Iranian immigrants, particularly women, who have depicted their struggles in blending in the American mainstream citizenry. Autobiographical writings such as *Lipstick Jihad* by Azadeh Moaveni (2005), *Even After All this Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* by Afschineh Latifi (2005), *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* by Roya Hakakian (2004), *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* by Firoozeh Dumas (2004), *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* by Azar Nafisi (2003), *Saffron Sky: A Life between Iran*

*and America* by Gelareh Asayesh (2000), *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* by Tara Bahrapour (2000) and *Foreigner* by Nahid Rachlin (1999) are some of the celebrated works, which have made it to high-profile publishing houses in the United States. The wide range of perspectives included in some of these memoirs and autobiographies reveals how immigrants feel about their “host society” and what sorts of problem they have to cope with in Iran and in America before and after their departure. It is also notable that all of the above-mentioned life narratives are written by women. Taking into account Afsaneh Najmabadi’s argument, in which she established a link between women’s bodies and the Iranian national body, Jennifer Worth discusses that

This trend seems limited to female authors, a phenomenon perhaps traceable to the nationalist ideology that has traditionally gendered the Iranian homeland as female; this observation becomes particularly poignant given that the mass emigration was spurred by the ascension to power of a repressively patriarchal fundamentalist government. Historically, women from both East and West have gravitated towards the written word as an artistic outlet which allowed them to step safely into the public sphere. In Iran, where Islam has been a formidable presence since the seventh century and the official state religion since the sixteenth century, the opportunities for women to be publicly seen and heard have been extremely limited, making the pull of the written word particularly strong. (143-144)

The entire argument seems insightful as the two trajectories of gendered subjectivities and feminine identities converge to grapple with nationalist and religious contentions. It also makes a retrospective journey into the impact of Islam on Iran and the marginalization of Iranian women, which can be read as another level of interpretation. In fact, when I bring the contexts of the texts into my study, and examine the social circumstances that have helped the artists construct the artworks, I look for ironic meanings that appear from within the network of the text, context, and the interpreter. This is in keeping with Hutcheon’s view, when the practice also aligns with Booth’s regarding the search for the latent meanings. Burke’s warning against subjective

perspectives is simultaneously applied in this thesis because I examine the interplay of different interpretations and, thus, do not rely my whole contention on a single perspective. Accordingly, there are a number of levels and themes, such as diaspora, political concerns (the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Hostage Crisis), cultural practices (both Iranian and American values), gender relations, and cultural representations, which find expression through the texts and contexts of the works under my analysis. Both Dumas's and Niami's literary and filmic projects portray Iranian communities in California before and after the Revolution. As to Dumas's memoirs, they deal with not only the hardships but also hilarious events an Iranian family experiences after immigrating to America. The reader follows childhood and adulthood memories of the narrator, Firoozeh, who is the author of autobiographies. Nazireh, Firoozeh's mother, and Kazem, Firoozeh's father, Francois, Firoozeh's French husband, as well as minor characters such as uncle Nematollah, Farshid (Firoozeh's brother), Aunt Parvin and other characters who make the plot of the story more colorful and eventful through their adventures in Iran and in America.

Niami's film, however, offers a present time slice of Shirin's life, the main character. The film is the story of Shirin and her falling in love with William, an American man who lives in a lighthouse near his mother's. Although engaged to Mike, a successful plastic surgeon in Beverley Hills, Shirin decided to cancel her marriage and follow her heart. Maryam, Shirin's mother, and Nader, Shirin's father, Mike, William and his mother Rachel shape the plot of the film, generating ethnically a diverse cast of characters. By comparison, though, Dumas's memoirs make a direct statement of the fact that her family immigrated to America before the Revolution, while Niami's film does

not make a straight reference as to whether Shirin's family arrived in America before or after the Revolution. After Shirin falls in love with William, she asks her father, Nader, how he and her mother married. Nader uses the phrase "back home," and tells Shirin the story of his marriage. However, Nader does not explain if they moved to America before or after the 1979 Revolution. In terms of Dumas's memoirs, the reader learns that Firoozeh's family immigrated to America during the former Shah's regime, but it is the Revolution that encourages them to take permanent residency in America and/or adopt America as their home. Humor in Dumas's and Niami's works does not hamper the reader from noting the fact that both Dumas and Shirin belong to the diasporic community of Iranians and that they are well acculturated to their host culture, so much so that both Firoozeh and Shirin marry non-Iranian men; Shirin marries Francois, a French-American man, and Shirin marries William, an American man. Therefore, there is no question about interracial marriage, cross-cultural exchanges, and assimilation in the host society as, first of all, both families are depicted to have lived in America for more than four decades, and as such America is their home now. Furthermore, due to their long residency in America and adjusting themselves to the host culture, both families have learned how to communicate with mainstream American citizenry, while they have maintained tight relations with their own diasporic community. Thus, comfort in feeling at home in America and in communicating with the mainstream population are two significant elements that occur within a successfully settled diasporic community. Georges Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr examine the pre- and post- Revolution waves of the Iranian immigrants in America as follows;

It may be argued that these two groups of immigrants had very different motives for leaving their country, thus resulting in different statistical profiles for each

group. The later wave must have included a substantial number of political refugees and exiles as contrasted to the earlier wave of students and economically motivated immigrants. While Iranians who arrived in the U.S. after the Iranian Revolution were not officially admitted as "parolees" or refugees, the lives and welfare of many of them were affected just as adversely as the well-being of the official refugees from Cuba or Vietnam. (3)

There have been a great many studies on the political and historical aspects of the 1979 Iranian Revolution by scholars such as Hiro (1991), Karsh (2002), Abrahamian (2008). Yet, the lived experience of the era calls for further investigation since over six million Iranians are still living in Western countries. While one needs to consider that the Iranian diaspora is not only confined to its largest population in North America, but stretches to other continents and countries such as Europe, Asia, and Australia, the wide spectrum of experiences gained after Iranians settled in the host nations is also noteworthy. The time and place diasporas, in general, arrive in their adopted lands, as well as how well they are received by their hosts are highly important. With respect to the emergence of the term "diaspora," Iranian scholars, Babak Elahi and Persis Karim, argue:

As Iranians move away from the nostalgia of exile, or revalorize that nostalgia, and as they become American and European ethnics while retaining a link to the past, the term diaspora has emerged as a keyword to describe the condition observed by sociologists, analyzed by literary theorists, critiqued by film scholars, and explored by interdisciplinary intellectuals generally about what it is Iranians are and experience as a result of having left Iran. (382)

Dumas's memoirs and Niami's film echo cultural themes, such as marriage and national celebrations, that are still practiced within the Iranian community. Therefore, one should note that the members of Iranian diaspora have retained their traditional values, although the representation and practices of which are blended with those of the host society in a hybrid fashion.

Dumas's memoirs are written in the form of a recollection of the past, especially of those in Iran with vigorous imagery that imply the nostalgic undertone of the pre-Revolution era. Nonetheless, one should be wary of the usage of terms diaspora and exile. Maliheh Tiregol who is "a systematic figure in theorizing exile literature," argues that exile literature refers to "the works whose creators write outside the borders of Iran, in a new environment, due to their refusal against, and objection to, the social and political conditions that dominate Iran" (Vahabzadeh 497). Tiregol places a specific emphasis on the concept of exile as a key term in her analysis, discussing that "emigration' [*mohajerat*'] conveys the choice of resettling [while] 'exile' [denotes] being forced out of a place" (497). As a result, exile literature becomes a category that speaks to psychological trauma conveyed by the experiences of expatriation or exodus due to terror and anxiety. Peyman Vahabzadeh makes mention of Tiregol with regards to the process an expatriate goes through: "exile is about the process that begins with the survival of identity and continues with the transnational period of bicultural identity to arrive at a transcultural identity" (498). My argument is that neither Dumas's texts nor Niami's film reflects any forced banishment from Iran and that none of them comes off as a recollection of trauma and terror in one's homeland. Therefore, I do not place the works under the category of exile writings. Bicultural and transcultural identity, however, are at work in the works, which is rather due to the mobility in an immigrant's life. Paul White asserts,

A common feature of many migrants and migrant cultures is ambivalence. Ambivalence towards the past and the present: as to whether things were better 'then' or 'now'. Ambivalence towards the future: whether to retain a 'myth of return' or to design a new project without further expected movement built in. Ambivalence towards the 'host' society: feelings of respect, dislike or uncertainty. Ambivalence towards standards of behaviour: whether to cling to the old or to

discard it, whether to compromise via symbolic events whilst adhering to the new on an everyday basis. (3-4)

Thus, one can discuss that displacement is neither completely diasporic nor completely exilic, but it bears some intrinsic characteristic that makes an individual move in different directions: thinking of the past yet enjoying the present; anticipating the future; assimilating into a host society yet following ethnic traditions. All this suggests that displacement does not promise an end in a migrant's mobility experience. Therefore, within the diasporic culture, it is the mobility and fluidity that are highly important. Diasporic cultures, as Hall cites, manifest that identity is always in the process of "becoming' as well as 'being'" and not something that is given (225). Therefore, according to Hall, it can be argued that all significant specificities of a culture, such as levels of signification, certain practices, evaluation approaches, and status determination, are all subject to reformation and reproduction in the face of both displacement and exile.

**CHAPTER ONE: Reading Irony and Humor in Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas's  
Selected Memoirs *Funny in Farsi* (2003) and *Laughing without an Accent* (2005)**

Graham Huggan puts forth a polemical discussion on marketing the cultures of the Other, arguing that hegemonic cultures, such as those of America and Europe, exercise a double commodification of minority cultures and literatures. Taking Middle Eastern women into account, Graham contends that they are encouraged by publishing houses to represent and propagate their everyday life for their Western reading public. However, this can, in a sense, reassert the inferior positionality of the Third World Muslim woman along the lines of imperial project by placing these voices in the margins of American hegemonic discourse. The increasing desire for nonfiction writings following 9/11, “particularly books which perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islamic men” has led to the remarkable success of many artists because American readers were restlessly inclined to raise their awareness about the allegedly threatening ethnic other (Whitlock 111). This is true of autobiographical writings after the 9/11 climate when the Middle East saw a number of military operations. The narratives that deal with the cultural run-ins and report the lived experiences of Middle Eastern writers find their ways in American publishing houses. Similarly, the condition of Muslim women and their lived experiences find expression in memoirs. As Chandra Mohanty asserts, the increasing publication of ethnic “Third World” life writings can be associated to a European and American desire in diversifying Eurocentric canons, which favor “exotic” and “different” narratives (77).

Firoozeh Dumas's writings, then, are part of the American tradition of autobiographical writings which possess multifarious voices coming from various ethnic categories. Farzaneh Milani analyzes the case of Iranian women writers who were



publishing after the 1979 Revolution and had no way but censor their stories. She concedes that memoirs written by Iranian women underwent inclusionary and exclusionary practices by the Iranian male tradition that believed not all literary body of autobiographical writings by women “are worthy of serious consideration” (11). However, diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs are not the subject of strict censorship practices and enjoy the liberty of presenting the materials the way the memoirists want. Nima Naghibi looks at autobiographical writings produced by diasporic Iranian women writers, and argues that this group of artists “challenge the stereotype of the self-effacing, modest Iranian woman and write themselves back into the history of the nation” (*Estranging the Familiar* 224). Hence, in Naghibi’s view, Iranian diasporic women writers act as revisionist historians who use autobiography as a strong tool in order to re-define themselves. The same is true of Dumas’s memoirs as her writings engender the conditions for the reception of a number of competing grounds of thinking such as gender relations and subject formation. That a woman lies at the center of the memoirs and that the story is narrated through her eyes is highly significant. Dumas’s memoirs do not align themselves with what Farzaneh Milani calls “hostage narratives,” which like Nafisi’s, Moshiri’s, and Hakakian’s, depict Iranian women as objects of abuse and oppression (Milani 130). Using a strategy that blends humor and multiple clusters of meaning, Dumas vocalizes Iranian women’s position not only within Iran but also within the Iranian diaspora in America. The works have provided Iranian diasporic women with the opportunity to represent or, rather, re-invent themselves in America. That is, through writing, Dumas allows a female character such as Firoozeh to articulate, negotiate, and redefine certain social, political, cultural, and historical themes, such as the Islamic

Revolution, the Hostage Crisis, cultural representations in media, racism, education, consumerism, and hybridity/migrancy. In so doing, Dumas attempts to dispute a substantial part of dominant discourses both inside and outside of Iran that stereotype and essentialize Middle Eastern men and women.

The fact that Dumas herself has written about diasporic Iranian women, and that in her writings she challenges patriarchy is notable. Dumas's father, Kazem, is not represented as a patriarchal Middle Eastern man who dominates the family, but he is portrayed as a secular amicable father who not only loves Iranian culture, but also adores American ways of living and culture. Nazireh, Dumas's mother, is not represented as an oppressed marginalized character, but she voices her opinions openly in the family. Firoozeh, too, has proved to be an independent woman whose father does not impose his will and intention on her. For instance, as her marriage to a Frenchman and her bond to American society demonstrate, Firoozeh enjoys the liberty of making decisions for her life. Western or "international" feminists, as Chandra Mohanty asserts, used critical notions such as patriarchy and oppression in their texts, which led to the construction of the category of the third world woman. As Mohanty argues, "[i]t is only when men and women are seen as different categories or groups possessing different already constituted categories of experience, cognition, and interests as groups that such a simplistic dichotomy is possible" (70). Mohanty warns against the spread of "a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression" among the third world woman by "international" feminists (Mohanty 56).

In *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* (2007), Nima Naghibi closely examines the case of Western feminism in Iran and interrogates the problem of "global sisterhood." By

presenting a historical analysis of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Iran, Naghibi investigates the discourse of sisterhood, which was in and of itself a host of various controversies such as inequality of social rights and subjugation of Iranian women. Sisterhood, in this regard, is predicated upon inequality between Western and Eastern sisters and is ascribed to a “hierarchical relationship between women who know and those who require instruction,” as well as “rescuing” Muslim sisters who are under the oppression of Islam (xxvi). Hence, sisterhood did not establish a concerted notion of equality among women.

The details in Dumas’s writings originate from her personal observation and lived experiences accumulated over specific historical periods in her life. Therefore, to argue as to whether the details are mere facts or not is irrelevant. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to understand the ways in which Dumas presents the details and incorporates them into distinguished temporal vacuums. For example, in terms of the Revolution of 1979, Dumas’s texts show a clear-cut distinction between the way Iranians were treated in America prior to the Revolution and afterward, revealing racism and historical transitions at the same time. Hence, the reader should be mindful of the eras in which the situations are installed. In *Funny in Farsi*, there is a chapter, entitled “I Ran and I Ran and I Ran,” which is not funny at all and looks at a specific event that occurred in the U.S in 1977. As Dumas writes, “... the Shah and his wife were scheduled to come to America to meet the newly elected president, Jimmy Carter” (*Funny in Farsi* 111). However, the anti-Shah demonstrators threatened the Iranians who had travelled to welcome the Shah in Washington D.C. Dumas’s family receives a letter that say, “Dear Brainwashed Cowards, You are nothing but puppets of the corrupt Shah. We will teach you a lesson you will never forget. Death to the Shah. Death to you” (112).

In another chapter in *Funny in Farsi* entitled “With a Little Help from my Friends,” the book gives a brief account of the post-Revolutionary atmosphere in America and how Iranians were treated shortly after the Revolution:

We remember the kindness more than ever, knowing that our relatives who immigrated to this country after the Iranian Revolution did not encounter the same America. They saw Americans who had bumper stickers on their cars that read “Iranians: Go Home” or “We Play Cowboys and Iranians.” The Americans they met rarely invited them to their houses. These Americans felt that they knew all about Iran and its people, and they had no questions, just opinions. My relatives did not think Americans were very kind. (36)

In the same chapter, the reader is reminded of Americans’ amicability and fellowship in the pre-Revolutionary era in America. The sharp contrast Dumas performs is provocative, in the sense that both the American and Iranian reading publics are prompted to observe the degree of disparity between the two eras. The amount of kindness and affection Firoozeh receives from her American class-mates in the first two years of their stay in the States is beyond words (34-35). The text wittily lays the second-graders’ kindness into a political context by raising an important fact about media and the twisted interpretation they perform, which goes as follows: “If someone had been able to encapsulate the kindness of these second-graders in pill form, the pills would undoubtedly put many war correspondents out of business” (34-35). The irony Dumas’s text captures here is very intense. The text implies that war correspondents engage in the fabrication of narratives about America as a hostile nation. In other words, the readers are advised to foster friendship and emotional bonds, especially among children, in addition to the fact that people can dispense with any sort of hostility and can defy stereotyping by gaining a better understanding of each other.

There is a third point in time when *Funny in Farsi* discloses the aftermath of the Hostage Crisis of 1979. I make references to both memoirs to show how the texts provide the reader with the socio-political landscape. In the chapter titled “Bernice,” the American readership comes to grasp the unfavorable atmosphere, fraught with hostility and racial bias, after the Hostage Take-over when Firoozeh writes,

During our stay in Newport Beach, the Iranian Revolution took place and a group of Americans were taken hostage in the American embassy in Tehran. Overnight, Iranians living in America became, to say the least, very unpopular. For some reason, many Americans began to think that all Iranians, despite outward appearances to the contrary, could at any given moment get angry and take prisoners. People always asked us what we thought of the hostage situation. “It’s awful,” we always said. This reply was generally met with surprise. We were asked our opinion on the hostages so often that I started reminding people that they weren’t in our garage. My mother solved the problem by claiming to be from Russia or “Torekey.” Sometimes I’d just say, “Have you noticed how all the recent serial killers have been Americans? I won’t hold it against you.” (*Funny in Farsi* 39-40)

Here, the text performs two functions simultaneously; First, the reader is notified of the racial profiling applied to Iranians in the wake of both the Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis. It is the political discourse that determines whether a certain nation is included in or excluded from the essentialist and reductionist practices of stereotyping. Second, the text is narrated through the personal prism of an Iranian immigrant who reports the phenomenon yet pairs humour with a political undertone to enhance the ironic undertone. Firoozeh’s mother negates her ethnic identity in order to ward off any probable questioning that might ensue while Firoozeh’s witty question directs the attention of the reader to yet another noteworthy matter: While an entire nation is all of a sudden demonized and held in disgust, the text uses a counter-discourse to complicate the dominant discourse published through American media outlets. Dumas’s witty response that hostages were not in their garage is combined with her question at the end of the

paragraph to suggest ironically that white Americans, too, have committed crimes before and yet they are hardly talked about in media. It is the ironic or unsaid meaning that hovers around the sort of racial profiling that is applied to the non-white people while the white people are excluded from such a discourse. Therefore, by raising the question of white serial killers, Dumas is attempting to include a discourse that redirects the attention to the white people. This can be interpreted on account of the aggregative function of irony, which is rooted in the positional superiority of a specific racial group to another. In terms of the aggregative, inclusionary and exclusionary practices are applied to different racial groups and social classes, which lead to the elimination of one group and the persistent presence of another in social and political discourses. Stereotyping practices, too, can be attributed to this function of irony, insofar as a set of qualities and characteristics are reduced to a nation.

In Dumas's second memoir, *Laughing without an Accent*, there are two chapters, namely, "Encore, Unfortunately" and "444 Days," that resonate the post-hostage crisis. While the former seems like a sequel to *Funny in Farsi*'s chapter "Bernice," the latter presents a novel perspective to the Hostage Crisis, in particular. As to "Encore, Unfortunately," Dumas recounts all the discriminations against Iranians, ranging from bumper stickers on Americans' cars that read "I Play Cowboys and Iranians" to a song called "Bomb Iran" (161-62). The chapter pictures a nightmarish atmosphere following the Hostage Crisis, but also the text shows how politicians take advantage of an incident in the past and set out to re-induce the same unfavorable atmosphere against a nation. "Bomb Iran" recently came back, thanks to John McCain, who sang part of it during one of his speeches" during his presidential campaigns (163). The way Dumas ends this

chapter with the recurrence of a past event at the present time through the actions of a renowned Republican figure may serve two purposes at the same time: First, the reader is left pondering over the past and present political atmospheres, the mood of which continues to the subsequent chapter. Second, the reader may realize that there are some politicians out there whose warmongering notions still exist until this day. These are two important messages the text tries to bring to the audiences in a tricky or, say, ironic manner.

It is in the chapter “444 Days,” where Kathryn Koob, an American diplomat held hostage in Iran during 1979-1980, is introduced into the storyline. The text fascinates the reader for the unanticipated adventure that is presented from a different perspective. This chapter does not wade into political concerns but rather juxtaposes an Iranian and an American who form a friendship, notwithstanding the political strains that have distanced both countries in many respects. The reader is filled in on Kathryn’s personality and her career history, ranging from “her fondness for *khoreshteh fesenjoon*, an exquisite Persian stew made with walnuts and concentrated pomegranate juice” to her position with “Iran-America Society” and a lot more governmental organizations in almost all continents across the world (216-17). However, one can find the point at which there is a clash of ideologies in the paragraph, revealing Dumas’s viewpoint: “Her [Kathryn’s] captors had claimed that all the fifty-two hostages were spies. Kathryn neither looked nor felt like a spy. I’m glad my dad swore at her captors. I only wish they had heard him” (216). The text continues to give a recollection of other memories such as Firoozeh and Kathryn’s trip together, but Kathryn’s personality as a religious, sophisticated American seems to stand out in this chapter:

Not surprisingly—or perhaps surprisingly for some—Kathryn is a firm believer in reconciliation. Having lived in Iran among Iranians, she knows that what she sees on television does not represent the vast majority of Iranians. She knows the real Iran. Almost everyone who advocates war with Iran has never been there. I assume the number one rule in war is “Don’t get to know the enemy.” Glimpses of shared humanity make it so hard to kill others. (219)

This paragraph constitutes the core of Dumas’s stance regarding the Hostage Crisis, media, and war. It initiates an argument by first addressing the audiences who may agree or disagree with a point. The juxtaposition of all these terms and themes can collectively seep into a deeply seated ironic inference: The media is heavily responsible for the misrepresentation of a nation and the escalation of situations, insofar as Kathryn Koob understands that the media presents distorted images of Iran while she does not hold the people of Iran accountable for what happened to her. My main point here is that the text ironically sets out to segregate the nation from the state, indicating that a state’s actions should not be attributed to its nation. Meanwhile, the excerpt shows that it is ignorance coupled with mediated images that provoke a nation to initiate war against another nation. One can read all these levels of “unsaid” meaning from this single paragraph (Hutcheon, 60).

Firoozeh Dumas’s texts depict a different discursive practice by critiquing both American and Iranian communities at the same time. In an attempt to expose commonplace stereotypes, Dumas devises a method which combines American humor with Scheherazadian type of storytelling and presents a large number of short stories in an episodic manner. This fashion allows for the entertainment of readers when Dumas experiments with a humorous language and, at the same time, delves into a slew of topical issues the memoirist aims to present. I speculate that the plots of the memoirs benefit from a sit-comic style of writing. That is, there are episodic or anecdotal



presentation of situations, with each episode introducing a new event that is non-chronologically crafted into the structure. Although sit-coms were originally presented in radio and later on T.V in the form of soap operas, I contend that Dumas's works are consistent with the sit-comic style of narrative. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik write

The term 'sit-com' describes a short narrative-series comedy, generally between twenty-four and thirty minutes long, with regular characters and setting. The episodic series – of which the sit-com is a subject – is, with the continuing serial, a mode of repeatable narrative which is particularly suited to the institutional imperative of the broadcast media to draw and maintain a regular audience. (233)

It takes approximately between twenty and thirty minutes to read through each episode of Dumas's works, and each episode revolves around a certain theme, such as Hostage Crisis, Iranian Revolution, school and summer camp memories, university memories, marriage ceremonies, daily routines and so on. The main characters, as well, find themselves in situations that require them to adjust to the host culture as immigrants, understand the cultural practices that might be different from theirs, and explain a tradition from Iran that might be unfamiliar to the American audiences. As such, the series of events are concerned with migration and assimilation into the host culture and society.

Read both in Farsi and in English inside and outside of America, Dumas's works place her immediate family in the heart of the story, and mock the predicaments they have encountered having relocated themselves to America. Firoozeh Dumas's position as the narrator of these events allows her to live in both cultures at the same time. More importantly, by coupling humor with memoir Dumas is able to conduct two important things: to humanize all Iranians, whether Iranian-Americans or native Iranians, and to gain an upper hand over her use of language or discursive practice. Both American and

Iranian audiences set out to empathize and sympathize with the Iranian characters when they also laugh at the predicaments the Iranian characters run into.

While Dumas's humor can be perceived as a useful device for raising serious socio-political subjects and portraying the hybrid or liminal possibilities of two cultures in a humorous way, one may still read beyond the political and social boundaries. On the one hand, Firoozeh Dumas employs American humor in order to mollify the tense political, social, and cultural tensions between the two countries, while, on the other, Dumas's humor attempts to resist the prevalent stereotypes that represent the Orient, in general, and Middle Eastern women, as being backward, silent, mystic, superstitious, and oppressed, in particular. Writing after the 9/11 era, Dumas unveils racial discrimination exercised against Iranians over the period following the 1979 Revolution. I argue that Dumas encourages the American audiences to think of the prevailing attitudes towards Iranians.

With respect to Dumas's humor, I investigate to what extent her memoirs can be read from multiple perspectives by both Iranian and non-Iranian scholars? Bringing forth the critique of scholars inside and outside of Iran on Dumas's memoirs, I examine how much they appreciate the memoirs according to their literary endeavour, rather than the validity of facts. In other words, to what extent can the readers move beyond Dumas's humor and understand irony in the texts? Accordingly, I place the focus of my analysis on the comprehension of the texts with respect to ironic inferences. To this end, I juxtapose the texts, contexts, and the levels of interpretations provided by the groups of scholars (Hutcheon 58). I also include Dumas's interviews, which reveal her purpose of writing the memoirs alongside the implicit or unsaid meanings she had aimed for in her

memoirs. Linda Hutcheon's guiding notion of irony along with the views of Iranian and non-Iranian critics shape the methodological and theoretical frame of my study. To cover many aspects of theoretical and practical grounds, I have benefitted from a variety of sources, such as journal papers, websites, weblogs, interviews, and talks that contribute to my research in this regard.

## **I. Discursive Communities and Dialogism: Voices from the Critics and in the Texts**

In terms of Hutcheon's discursive communities and Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, I perform two tasks concurrently; I compare multiple responses that the readers based inside and outside of Iran, whether Iranian or non-Iranian, have provided when reading the memoirs. This method helps me understand to what extent the culturally and ethnically diverse groups of readers can understand Dumas's humor and the irony in the texts. Meanwhile, I examine dialogism and heteroglossic possibilities within the literary body where there is the conflict of voices and/or ideologies arising from various characters and the narrator. These two tasks eventually help me unmask altering interpretations or ironic inferences that can be obtained from the critics' reading alongside my individual reading of the memoirs.

### **1. Critical Reception: Responses from Inside Iran**

#### ***I. Funny in Farsi***

Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Cyrus Amiri perform a deconstructive reading of *Funny in Farsi* in a paper.<sup>21</sup> They write,

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<sup>21</sup> They put forward their analysis in a paper in Farsi. Translation is mine.

Dumas is able to present a, more or less, different image of the migrant Iranian woman to both Iranian and American audiences and, as such, her text disputes American audiences' imagination of Iran and their expectations regarding the memoirs written by Iranian women. (103)

Marandi and Amiri investigate a number of post-Revolutionary Iranian women's memoirs from historical and political points of view. They affirm that "Dumas's has steered clear of themes such as anti-Iranianism, and has complicated stereotypical images, including patriarchy, dogmatism, and alienation, that pervade Azar Nafisi's and Nahid Rachlin's memoirs" (109). Hence, Marandi and Amiri develop a comparative study of a number of memoirs written by many Iranian women. They maintain that,

[E]xcept for the Hostage Crisis, that was misinterpreted, the author has adopted a rather neutral and objective approach in rendering historical, social, and cultural facts, especially those concerned with the dominant discourses that beam Islamophobia and racism in American media outlets. (111)

From this, one can argue that scholars such as Marandi and Amiri recognize Dumas's *Funny in Farsi* as a text which resists Westerners' racial discrimination and misrepresentation of Iranians in American media. Additionally, Marandi and Amiri probe into the memoir's disclosure of American media's biased attitude towards Muslims and Iranians. As to Dumas's practice of deconstruction through humour, Marandi and Amiri state that, "There is a significant aspect of Dumas's work that is worth noting: Contrary to many other Iranian memoirists whose setting of stories is Iran, Dumas's is America" (119). This means that the audiences who have thus far learned about Iran through an introspective gaze from inside the country are now encouraged to discover what America looks like from the point of view of a female Iranian immigrant who sets her stories in America. In fact, by way of defamiliarizing and deconstructing, Dumas's work has managed to attribute all the common stereotypes and wrong images back to America

itself. Thus, when an American audience realizes that Americans, despite their country's presence in Iran for decades prior to the Revolution, still do not know where Iran is, or that they mistake Africa for Asia, or that someone like Francois – Firoozeh's husband – eats voraciously almost to death in order to please Firoozeh's parents, they will think of Americans as the people who are superstitious, ignorant, and backward. Marandi and Amiri have advanced their argument without having mentioned the levels of humor in the text but, instead, have focused on the interplay and subversion of concepts.

What Dumas has done in the text is associated to the ludic function of irony that performs a mild criticism of the behavior of Americans, as well as that of Iranians. Meanwhile, one can see the caricature-ish depiction of Dumas's parents and Americans as a technique of "lampoon" for the purpose of enhancing "comic effect" to a serious subject matter or content (Abrams 28). Either way, Dumas has not verbally attacked Iranians or Americans, but has mildly disapproved certain cultural practices and modes of behavior that may not be socially accepted or may be culturally awkward.

Another Iranian scholar, Mojtaba Hosseini, believes that, "What we come across in this book is some fascinating humour that arises from the cultural differences between Iran and America."<sup>22</sup> As to Dumas's description of Iranian culture and Islamic Revolution, Hosseini maintains that,

Contrary to some critics' opinions, especially that of Mobarezin (The Combatants) website, who claim Dumas has presented an ugly and disgusting portrait of Iranian family, I tend to think that despite some minor and ignorable issues that have something to do with Dumas's perspective resulting from the environment she was raised in, the reader does not feel any sense of humiliation and deprecation in the work. Dumas's misjudgment and misconception of the Islamic Revolution can be

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.mirmalas.com/news/3275/> (accessed on September 15, 2015). Translation is mine.

associated to the influence of Western media and propaganda on her. As an instance, Dumas shows how unaware she is of the grandeur of the Islamic Revolution when she mentions somewhere in her *Funny Farsi* "... how sad it was that people so easily hate an entire population simply because of the actions of a few. And what a waste it is to hate, he always said. What a waste."<sup>23</sup>

Here again, a critic such as Mobarezin website fails to distinguish between the ludic and assailing functions of irony, and as such, it takes comic comments of Dumas as a means of severe verbal attack against the Islamic Revolution. Hosseini seems to have been confused as to what Dumas is trying to convey: Hosseini's example of Dumas's unawareness is derived from an excerpt in the chapter entitled "I-raynians Need not Apply," where Dumas brings up the historic Hostage Crisis of American embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 following the Islamic Revolution, which had taken place on February 11, 1978. The Hostage Takeover took 444 days and the American hostages were eventually released. This whole event stirred anger and hatred among Americans against Iranians at the time. As the above-mentioned chapter reports:

Vendors started selling T-shirts and bumper stickers that said "Iranians Go Home" and "Wanted: Iranians, for Target Practice." Crimes against Iranians increased. People would hear my mother's thick accent and ask us, "Where are you from?" They weren't looking for a recipe for stuffed grape leaves. Many Iranians suddenly became Turkish, Russian, or French. (*Funny in Farsi* 117)

As such, the memoir also talks about a difficult period of time she and her family along with many other Iranians living in the United States had to go through at the time.

Dumas's account of the Hostage Crisis and all the hard feelings may prompt an American audience to think seriously of the then American media's task of beaming the wave of hatred among Americans:

With each passing day, palpable hatred grew among many Americans, hatred not just of the hostage takers but of all Iranians. The media didn't help. We opened our

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<sup>23</sup> Mirmalas (see footnote 1).

local paper one day to the screaming headline “Iranian Robs Grocery Store.” Iran has as many fruits and nuts as the next country, but it seemed as if every lowlife who happened to be Iranian was now getting his fifteen minutes of fame. (117)

Coming back to Hosseini’s viewpoint about Dumas’s “misjudgment of the Islamic Republic,” one may feel compelled to compare his and many other critics’ reviews inside Iran with Dumas’s statement in her book. It may strike a reader to find out that Dumas is, first of all, quoting her father, Kazem, at the end of this chapter. Second, it is obvious that the preceding sentences have escaped the notice of Iranian critics inside the country, be it intentionally or not. Third, the reader realizes that Kazem lost his career due to the tense relations between Iranians and Americans because of the Hostage Crisis. Unemployed and almost frustrated, Kazem sought several positions, only to find that he was rejected for any position he had applied. As *Laughing without an Accent* puts it, Kazem “was, thanks to the Iranian Revolution, unemployed and, thanks to the hostage situation, unemployable” (214). Dumas gives a detailed description of the chaos, but she never makes any mention that her father was ashamed of his ethnic identity:

Throughout his job ordeal, my father never complained. He remained an Iranian who loved his native country but who also believed in American ideals. He only said how sad it was that people so easily hate an entire population simply because of the actions of a few. And what a waste it is to hate, he always said. What a waste. (121)

An Iranian audience inside Iran may find Hosseini’s viewpoint to be a mild remark, while Mobarezin’s views, a website that is supportive of fundamentalists’ and extremists’ views, to be a harsh critique on Dumas’s work. Having said that, in the process of reading and evaluating an individual work, one can see the elimination and suppression of some parts of the original text. In the case of Hosseini and Mobarezin, no attention was invested in reading the work’s aesthetic qualities or in reading the work as a personal migrant narrative. If someone looks more closely into the text or even in the example

Hosseini cites, he or she can trace an ironic point in Kazem's statement. Kazem proclaims an insightful comment about mankind's manners when he, at the same time, denounces any sort of discrimination against an entire nation. Political propaganda published from the state-run media outlets can demonize a nation, turning one against another. In such an ailing atmosphere, it is highly unlikely to look for the facts and avoid biases. The high tide of antagonism and hostility against one nation can easily spread to many strata of a society, obscuring the ordinary citizens' judgment. In a similar vein, Mobarezin website took out some excerpts in Dumas's memoir, disregarding other aspects and levels of the work. However, the way Mobarezin looks at Dumas's memoir is from the point of view of the "assailing" function of irony that carries a bitter critique or applies satire to rectify a range of values (Hutcheon, 54-55). Critics, such as Mobarezin, lay their assumption on the way Iranians are represented in Dumas's memoir. They claim that Dumas has humiliated Iranians and the Islamic Revolution in her work. However, they have overlooked this use of humor and self-deprecation for the purpose of bringing a message to the audience beyond humor.

It is helpful to consider other Iran-based critics and websites that present their critiques from the point of view of literary criticism. Tebyan, for example, publishes a compilation of reviews conducted by other Iranian critics on its website, but to introduce Dumas and her book *Funny in Farsi*, Tebyan says that the book "carries subtle and latent witty humor."<sup>24</sup> Tebyan also maintains that, "Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas is an Iranian author living in the U.S. She thinks in Farsi, follows her life adventures in Farsi, but she writes in English."<sup>25</sup> As to the reviews of other critics published by Tebyan, the first one

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.tebyan.net/newindex.aspx?pid=116387> (accessed on September 15, 2015). Translation is mine.

<sup>25</sup> Tebyan (see footnote 25).



on the top is a review by a newspaper called Negah-e-No (A New View), which writes, “Dumas brings to the audiences a selective range of topics she thinks have had a great impact on her life ... The author has tried to import humour into her work to temper the rough and bitter moments of her life.”<sup>26</sup> Negah-e-No, also, makes mention of the Hostage Crisis of 1979 and its aftermath for Iranian immigrants in the U.S, in addition to the fact that “the author has not forgotten her Iranian cultural identity as opposed to many Iranian immigrants.”<sup>27</sup> This newspaper, meanwhile, includes Dumas’s note to her translator, which reads, “I hope I have been able to echo my respect and deep love for Iranian families and my culture on these pages. Despite being away from my country for a large part of my life, the love of Iran flows in my veins like blood.”<sup>28</sup>

Ehsan Osivand with Hamshahri Javan website (The Young Fellow Citizen), admires Dumas’s literary attempt in publicizing Iranian and American cultural landscapes, which he believes was not an easy task. He continues his review, including important themes, such as family, alienation, characterization of Dumas’s family, narratology, and cultural identity. He believes that “Kazem plays a key role in the plot of the story along with Dumas’s mother and uncle Nematollah, but Kazem is tightly affiliated to Iranian culture despite having lived in America for many years.”<sup>29</sup> Osivand also informs his reader of the awards Dumas has won thus far and continues that *Funny in Farsi* has been incorporated into course curriculum for reading classes at some American universities and schools. Another critic, Hossein Pakdel, writes about Dumas’s

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<sup>26</sup> Tebyan (see footnote 25).

<sup>27</sup> Tebyan (see footnote 25).

<sup>28</sup> Tebyan (see footnote 25).

<sup>29</sup> Tebyan (see footnote 25).

“literary adroitness in comparing cultural differences, as well as politics that leaves a direct impact on human relations.”<sup>30</sup>

The weblog Ketabkhaneh-ye Omumi-ye Basij-e Tehran (The Public Library of Basij of Tehran) admires Dumas’s work, “despite all the harsh reviews against the book,” and maintains that, “Identity for the immigrants born outside of their native lands sounds like a redundant thing and immigrants have no way but to accept the expected or unexpected social conventions of their recipient society.”<sup>31</sup> This site quotes some excerpts from Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* that echo many aspects of Iranian culture, including savory flavors of Persian cuisine and past memories that still can be reminisced by characters.

The last Iranian critic in this section is Mohammad Agha Rahmani who compares Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* to Zoya Pirzad’s book entitled *Cheragh haa raa Man Khaamoosh Mikonam (I Turn off the Lights)* in terms of the sequences of events and plots. He also goes on to explain that, “both writers are Iranian women who come from the same hometown in Iran, Abadan.”<sup>32</sup> Despite his succinct review, it encourages the Iranian readers to look at both literary works from the point of view of feminist writing. As seen, the depth and length of Iranian critics’ views from inside Iran have been either very short or technically naïve.

## **II. *Laughing without an Accent***

There are five Farsi versions of the book published by five different publishing houses in Iran. The translations differ on the syntactic level of translation while there are

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<sup>30</sup> Tebyan (see footnote 25).

<sup>31</sup> <http://basij-tehran.blogfa.com/post/6/> (accessed on September 17, 2015). Translation is mine.

<sup>32</sup> <http://soldiers.persianblog.ir/post/13/> (accessed on October 1, 2015). Translation is mine.

some minor semantic errors that arise from the translators' naivety and their insufficient knowledge of the North American idioms and culture. Such semantic errors were almost none in the Farsi translation of Dumas's *Funny in Farsi* performed by Mohammad Soleimani Nia, who was in constant correspondence with the author. However, the sense of humor is not lost in any of the Farsi translations of *Laughing without an Accent*. Of all these, however, Gholam Reza Emami's version has been embraced by Iranian readers and critics inside Iran. Iranian Book News Agency published the reviews of a couple of Iranian critics held in a forum in Iran where Emami also appears among other guest speakers and critics. Emami stresses that the book is a memoir embellished with literary devices and that he tried to be a faithful translator. He maintained that "a translator is an intermediary that bridges the gaps between two cultures, although I [Emami] may not agree with the author's viewpoints."<sup>33</sup> He also disagreed with the title of Dumas's first memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, which was replaced by the title "*Scent of Hyacinth, Scent of Pine*" in the target text. Although Dumas, in her correspondences with the translator, was not content with the change of title, she eventually admitted that the second title may make more sense to an Iranian audience as the title resonates the cultural values in both Iran and America. Emami points out that, "The author has just narrated her life history and has left the task of reviewing to the reader."<sup>34</sup>

Ehsan Abbaslou, another critic, develops his review that I reflect below:

Dumas's second memoir is a sequel or supplementary series to her first memoir ... It is not as popular and well-written as the first work ... the plot is fraught with cultural practices and values but it sometimes strays away from being humorous enough and the tone grows sad. The book's humorous tone is abated as compared with the first book, and the author has included her personal views into this memoir and, as such, she has distanced herself from the fictive nature of her

<sup>33</sup> [www.ibna.ir/fa/doc/report/124399/](http://www.ibna.ir/fa/doc/report/124399/) (accessed on October 2, 2015). Translation is mine.

<sup>34</sup> Ibna (see footnote 34).

work... Migrant literature is different from the literature of exile. Dumas's book fits into the first category because it is not essentially a political work, yet it offers unavoidable lines of comparison. There is a combination of critical and nostalgic notions towards home, and many generations are sketched alongside the transformation of viewpoints. However, different viewpoints do not complicate or conflict each other ... This book can teach us how to apply humor to an artwork, but we should also note that humor in this book is highly culture-based as though it was specifically written for an American audience, insofar as there is a long list of American and Western products and brands.<sup>35</sup>

Abbaslou's argument may interest a reader who looks for the conflict of ideas that he contends is missing in the book and the notion of readership. While he mentions earlier that there are "generations" of characters, "transformation of viewpoints," he still does not recognize the possibility of the conflict of ideas that these "generations" may induce. In other words, Abbaslou completely dismisses the point that the text produces any dialogue through its characters, and yet he concedes that there is a "transformation of viewpoints." However, one finds that the text unites differing viewpoints issued from Iranian and American characters in several situations. It is not acceptable, though, to argue that all the voices, viewpoints, and worldviews the characters – with different social and ethnic backgrounds – articulate are unilateral and homogenized. In the case of the reading public, Dumas's first memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, too, was fraught with commercial names and brands, American characters, places, etc., but also there was a long list of Iranian foods, places, names, and so forth. In other words, it is basically inevitable to write about America and yet avoid American names and trademarks or to write about America and Iran but include Iranian names in the texts only. The memoirs first came out in the U.S in English. Therefore, it is safe to say that they were written for the American readership.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibna (see footnote 34).

Kamran Parsinejad, another critic, develops his premise on the basis of genealogy by drawing the fine line between a novel or fiction and a memoir. He continues, “Sometimes an author aims to write a novel, but he or she ends up with writing an autobiography.”<sup>36</sup> The points that may strike an informed reader emerge when Parsinejad begins enumerating the weaknesses of the text:

Every story benefits from a key component, that is, the chain of cause and effect that foreshadow the sequence of events in the plot. This memoir lacks consistency and integrity, which may lead the reader to confusion. Dumas should have better presented her characters and she should have better processed their roles and the situations.<sup>37</sup>

To address Parsinejad’s viewpoint, one can remember Dumas’s opinion about her way of presenting characters and events. The chapter “A Moveable Feast” opens with two central questions about the author’s writing process, “People always ask me how I remember the details of my past. ‘Did you keep a journal your whole life?’ ‘Do you make things up?’” (*Laughing* 78). Dumas, in fact, addresses the tension that exists between the two genres of fiction and non-fiction. Thus, the reader can identify the author’s writing process in the subsequent paragraph where she links the process to visualizing and recalling events, irrespective of their chronological and sequential order of events. She says:

Truth is, I have a memory for certain things and not for others. For me, watching any movies is like watching it for the first time, every time. I cannot remember plots, character names, or pretty much any other detail that may prove that I actually saw the movie. I can, however, recall, in perfect detail, the meal I had prior to seeing the movie. (78)

It is important, then, to note that Dumas does not carry out her writing in accordance with a classic method of story-telling that demands an organized arrangement of events,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibna (see footnote 34).

<sup>37</sup> Ibna (see footnote 34).

setting and time. Her process is a self-experienced story-telling that relies upon a selective process of the situations or events that she can reminisce more vividly. Dumas's technique of narration in both memoirs is based on the exact process of recalling and reporting. Nonetheless, I suggest that we, instead, consider the act of recalling the memories as a process through which Dumas is able to re-present her personal views of the Islamic Revolution, and the Hostage Crisis in her writings. As Naghibi discusses the writings of diasporic Iranian women writers and their process of recalling past memories in *Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women's Autobiographies* (2009),

In the Iranian context, the radical rupture in the political, social, and cultural fabric of the nation effected by the revolution can enable, and indeed already has enabled, alternative forms of self-imagining. The redefinition of the nation, of culture, and of gender roles are represented as both rupture and possibility in Iranian women's writings, positioning Iranian women in the diaspora as key players in the process of reimagining Iranian women's subjectivities through revolutionary trauma. (89)

Therefore, it is Dumas's gendered identity that finds expression in her memoirs. Besides "self-imagining" through the act of remembering, it is Dumas' technique of importing humour into certain situations amplifies the effect of laughter the text seeks to perform. As such, the text specifically puts forth the story-telling technique, which is sharply opposed to what Parsinejad tries to prove. Placed under the category of memoir, Dumas's work should not be critiqued, at least, the way Parsinejad carried out above with respect to classic method of structuring the sequences or components of the story.

The above-mentioned critics have also made arguments about the narrator of the memoir. While Abbaslou states that "the narrator is not reliable, insofar as she presents inconsistent views, Parsinejad believes that the narrator is reliable, which he viewed to be the major factor in building up trust between the Iranian reader and the text and the main

reason why the text was well embraced by Iranians.”<sup>38</sup> It is interesting how two Iranian critics attending the same forum put forth opposite viewpoints regarding an individual text.

Tebyan directs the attention of the readers to the cultural differences Dumas’s work exhibits, but the website views the work as being devoid of any satiric or sarcastic tone, although it admits that the text employs humor extensively targeted at her immediate family. Tebyan praises the text, but contends that, “an Iranian audience may feel humiliated by a series of ignominious events placed into some chapters that depict Iranians’ manners and behavior abroad, such as ‘Maid in Iran,’ ‘‘Twas the Fight Before Christmas,’ ‘Encore, Unfortunately,’ and ‘Seeing Red.’”<sup>39</sup> This website continues naming a series of chapters that mainly show hilarious situations (“My Achilles’ Meal,” and “Peelings, Nothing More Than Peelings”), some chapters that develop a critique of educational environment and recreational habits (“Eight Days a Week” and “Past the Remote”), which help the reader make better choices in life, and finally a single chapter (“Pomp It Up”) that didactically expounds the social values. Obviously, Tebyan configures the horizon that may not interest all critics; First of all, the website does not accept the text’s effort in using humor along with other literary tropes, which may be completely refuted by any other critic who examines the text’s aesthetic and textual qualities. Irony is a literary trope that the text benefits from to explore latent meanings. Second, Tebyan acknowledges that the text can be divided into specific themes, yet does not believe that the text employs sarcasm or satire to point to human errors and follies.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibna (see footnote 34).

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.tebyan.net/newindex.aspx?pid=213558> (accessed on October 4, 2015). Translation is mine.

How can it be, then, that a text can carry out a critique on education system or pastime in America and yet lack major literary devices, such as satire or sarcasm? Being funny and humiliating at the same time means the text still needs something else, that is, another literary trope and technique, be it irony or sarcasm or satire, to accomplish its task. Finally, the audiences need to understand that Tebyan is responsible for its reviews and cannot impose its opinion on the readers. The audiences, on the other hand, should not let their viewpoints be suppressed through a reviewer's lens.

Similar to Iranian Book News Agency, another Iranian website named Book Club extends its review from the point of view of translation. Book Club places its emphasis on the translation carried out by Armanush Babakhanians, an Iranian-Armenian, who, as the weblog claims, "has performed a poor translation of the book, dismissing the linguistic levels of the original."<sup>40</sup> Book Club calls the attention of the reader to a section in the first chapter entitled "Funny in Persian" that is missing in Babakhanians's version. This may surprise an Iranian or an American reader to realize that the translator has arbitrarily censored the part that Dumas gives a brief account of winning an award from a magazine in Iran for her first book *Funny in Farsi*. As the original text puts forward:

During its first year in Iran, *Atre Sombol*, *Atre Koj* won the Reader's Choice Award from a magazine for twentysomethings called *Chel Cherogh*, meaning "chandelier." The name refers to the magazine's goal, which is to bring light where it is needed. (10)

Taking the inclusive aspect of irony into consideration, I would argue that it is hard to find a viable reason as to why the translator removed this section in the Farsi version.

The gap is still there, while it does not exist in Emami's translation. One may ask, "Is it

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<sup>40</sup> <http://bookclub.blogfa.com/post-158.aspx> (accessed on October 7, 2015). Translation is mine.



because the text continues to say that Dumas had to send a photo wearing hijab to the magazine?” The original text, though, continues, “I tucked my hair under a periwinkle pashmina, put on more makeup than I usually wear, in order to compensate for the lack of hair, and stood in front of the Christmas tree while my eleven-year-old took a few pictures” (10). Another reader may ask, “Is it because of Dumas’s hijab as she is Muslim and standing by a Christmas tree that Babakhanians preferred to remove this part?” the translator, after all, is Christian and may not have wanted the reader to see a Muslim woman wearing hijab shoot a photo next to the Christmas tree. Yet, another reader may ask, “Is the translator flattering the government by eliminating the section that may indirectly suggest that Dumas was forced to wear hijab?” Whatever the reason, Babakhanians’s version is still being published in Iran and the Iranian audiences may not be aware of this level of censorship. One can read all these unsaid aspects of irony from the translator’s arbitrary elimination of some sections in the text and bear all the questions above in mind.

## **2. Critical Reception: Responses from Outside Iran**

In *Off the Grid* (2004), Mottahedeh argues that Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* maladroitly translates Iranian culture into a language imbued with self-deprecating and humorous terms, so that she can make her work understandable to the American audience while straying away from the tense relations of Iran and America. Mottahedeh claims that Dumas’s representation of Iranian culture is fragmented because Dumas is distanced from the cultural values and practices inside the country. One can contend that Mottahedeh’s claim means that she possesses a more in-depth knowledge of Iranian culture while Dumas does not. However, Mottahedeh is also an immigrant and thus as

much distanced from Iran as Dumas is. Mottahedeh, as such, places her emphasis on the authenticity and validity of Dumas's depiction of Iranian culture, not the artistic or aesthetic qualities. Yet, a couple of things should be addressed here; There is a category of Iranians, on the one hand, that is comprised of those who fled Iran following the turmoil of the 1979 Revolution and who cannot travel back and forth between Iran and America due to political and religious issues, thus they are exiles. On the other, Dumas's family is not prevented from travelling back to Iran, and they sharply stand against the former group of immigrants. As such, Dumas belongs to the latter group of Iranians who can freely cross the border.

It is worth noting that Mottahedeh's response was not left unanswered as her argument is addressed by another scholar. In response to Mottahedeh's argument of Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*, Amy Motlagh puts forth her view that complicates both Mottahedeh's and Dumas's viewpoints in her article entitled *Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of Iranian Diaspora* (2011). Her contention is that Mottahedeh does not approach Dumas's work in a scholarly manner and does not view it as one of the possible angles an autobiography renders. Motlagh argues:

Though there is certainly much to discuss and criticize in Dumas's understanding of Iranian culture, one might observe that the major crime this memoir commits is not being as funny as its title would lead the reader to expect. Yet Mottahedeh chooses not to read it as the personal story of an American immigrant writing about a culture from which she is admittedly distanced and whose inconsistencies she has tried to render comprehensible through humor. Instead, after censuring Dumas's portrayal of her family's gleeful enjoyment of free samples at a Price Club, one of the enormous warehouse stores that arose in Southern California in this era, Mottahedeh proposes that the Iranian Shi'i custom of *nazri*, the charity vow, is a morally preferable method for the distribution of free goods — a process through which both giver and receiver may participate thoughtfully in the experience of exchange: "Few living in the Islamic Republic today would see the widespread practice of communal hospitality known as *nasri* [*sic*] as somehow less free than Dumas's sampling. For Dumas, it would seem, freedom in America is the

endless possibility of self-indulgence understood without any self-reflection. This is freedom, yes, but at what cost? Total war? Occupation? Perhaps. (419)

Mottahedeh submits her critique of Dumas's perception of Iranian culture with respect to a chapter entitled "America, Land of the Free" in the memoir *Funny in Farsi*.

Mottahedeh, however, dismisses Dumas's underlying humorous tone: Dumas juxtaposes democracy with free samples of food in the Price Club to make an ironic indication.

Motlagh employs reception theory in investigating alternative levels of interpretation the reading public renders possible.

The handing out of free samples in any retail context is hardly intended as an act of charity; typically, it is an act intended to solicit purchase based on the receivers' enjoyment of the heretofore-untasted product. The reader cannot help wondering if Mottahedeh's pursuit of this line of reasoning means that she genuinely believes that these are parallel, comparable rituals, or if this is merely a rhetorical strategy to assert the superior knowledge held by the Iranian scholar. As readers, we can only know what the consequence of this rhetorical move is. By equating two unrelated concepts, Mottahedeh supplants the perspective of the naive diasporic Iranian (here, Dumas) with her own specialist's knowledge of what is going on "in the Islamic Republic today," calling into question Dumas's ability to speak authoritatively even about her own experience as an Iranian transplanted to Orange County. (420)

By including a range of possible responses of the reading public into her analysis,

Motlagh is able to animate a reception-theory approach that looks at a variety of possible meanings and aesthetic properties of both Mottahedeh's and Dumas's texts. In order to avoid falling prey to a single-faceted and biased critique on Mottahedeh's argument, it is then worth noting how Dumas describes her family's notion of living in America in this memoir:

During our Thanksgiving meal, my father gives thanks for living in a free country where he can vote. I always share gratitude for being able to pursue my hopes and dreams, despite being female. My relatives and I are proud to be Iranian, but we also give tremendous thanks for our lives in America, a nation where freedom reigns. (*Funny in Farsi*, 75)

Dumas raises the issue of gender here when she indirectly posits that men and women do not enjoy equal social rights in Iran. Given Dumas' view, contrary to Iran, America stands out as a country that promises a free choice of living and more opportunities, especially to women. Firoozeh's admiration of America as "the greatest democracy on earth" may have prompted Mottahedeh to deliver a harsh criticism on Dumas's memoir (75). Mottahedeh was probably better off considering the paragraph preceding to the one above. In that prior paragraph, Dumas opens up a fresh view toward politics, the Middle East, and solutions, but what is interesting is that she uses metaphorical language to propose an idea:

Meanwhile, all the food, including the turkey and trimmings, gets eaten and we all share the American tradition of feeling more stuffed than the bird. Then it's time for dessert: baklava, fruit, pastries, and pumpkin pie, which we serve with Persian ice cream. With its chunks of cream, roasted pistachios, and aromatic cardamom, Persian ice cream serves as a reminder that Persia was once one of the greatest empires in the world. I believe peace in the Middle East could be achieved if the various leaders held their discussions in front of a giant bowl of Persian ice cream, each leader with his own silver spoon. Political differences would melt with every mouthful. (74)

This paragraph can be read as carrying an unsaid meaning or differential aspect of irony. In the context of the American tradition of Thanksgiving Day, Dumas incorporates Persian cuisine to indicate that, first, American culture is pursued differently by diasporic communities as opposed to the way Americans do; second, the host traditions typically go with similar traditions in the diasporic community and form a medley and mosaic of the host and home cultures, hence hybrid; and third, political upheavals can "melt" and dissolve into the multi-layered-ness of outlooks the international perspective may render. The imagery and sensual perception – mostly gustatory, olfactory, and visual – that Dumas inserts in the paragraph conceive a metaphor which can guarantee a more profound comprehension of the situation. However, aside from the colorful depiction of

ethnic and cultural values, Dumas leads the reader to think of the varied culture of “Persia,” at least on the culinary level, while subsequently involving eating as an important act in which the solution for the Middle East crises lie. Thus, ironically, Dumas encourages an inclusionary politics that hinges upon an open call for everyone to look at critical issues from a multiplicity of angles, perhaps a reconciliatory tactic that resembles international cuisines. Thus, other than merely questioning Dumas’s inability in portraying the Iranian culture decently, as one may assert, Motlagh opens up yet another opportunity in reading Dumas’s memoir. She quotes Mottahedeh to remind us not to disapprove of an artwork on the basis of a single cultural misunderstanding, but to put it in an individual frame among many other existing frames of life history. There is yet another critic who perceives Dumas’s life writings to be “unique forms of exil[ic] cultural production,” appreciating the attempt in bridging the gap between the two countries and celebrating the recognition of the diasporic Iranian-American status as a distinct ethnic category (*Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing* 354). Like Motlagh, Malek gives credit to the agency and authority created in Dumas’s memoir, which shape the literary taxonomy of Iranian-American diasporic writings. It is then in literary endeavors such as Dumas’s that Iranian diaspora finds substance, existence, and meaning.

## **II. Possible or Altering Responses: Ironic Inferences**

In this section, I examine multiple and ironic meanings that can be attained from the convergence of the texts and contexts. I have grouped various themes that invite readers to explore how texts and contexts collectively play out in the production of ironic

inferences. Themes are selected and listed in accordance to their repetition and prevalence in the texts.<sup>41</sup>

## 1. Education Unpacked

### *Funny in Farsi*

Dumas foregrounds education as the earliest theme in chapter one entitled Leffingwell Elementary School. By doing this, she is able to constitute the point of departure for other relevant ironic concepts to unfold in the work. At school where Nazireh accompanies her daughter, Firoozeh, she is embarrassingly unable to spot Iran on the map of the world and Firoozeh blames this on her mother's poor education, which she reckons to be the problem of "her [mother's] generation" (*Funny*, 5). Firoozeh also identifies the genesis of this problem as follows: "In her [Nazireh's] era, a girl's sole purpose in life was to find a husband. Having an education ranked far below more desirable attributes such as the ability to serve tea or prepare baklava" (5). Hence, Firoozeh relates the problem of English language, alongside other weaknesses such as a fragmented knowledge of geography, to her mother's insufficient education in Iran. Being embarrassed by her mother, Firoozeh wishes they had stayed home that day: "Clearly, Mrs. Sandberg had planned on incorporating us into the day's lesson. I only wished she had told us earlier so we could have stayed home" (6). In bringing to the audience the awkward moments facing her family, Firoozeh mentions, "Now all the students stared at us, not just because I had come to school with my mother, not because we couldn't speak their language, but because we were stupid" (6). This whole

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<sup>41</sup> The choice of themes rests upon my understanding and reading of Dumas's memoirs, while there can be further levels yet to be interpreted by other interpreters and readers.

misfortune can, on the other hand, be interpreted from another point of view: One may read this as a text that generates laughter for an American audience by treating non-Westerners, specifically Middle Easterners, as an object of mockery. Thus, one may contend that since one of the common stereotypes attributed to non-Westerners and “Orientals” is backwardness and stupidity, so is Dumas’s writing faithfully in keeping with Westerners’ frame of thinking. This is, yet again, another way of reading Dumas’s memoir that demonstrates the miscellany of voices the audiences may produce. However, Leila Pazargadi argues that, “Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* is unique in using humor to break through reductive stereotypes that characterize Middle Eastern women as silent, backward, and traditional” (24). Pazargadi’s premise is based upon the analysis of gendered discourse. As she asserts, Dumas’s text renders a unique repositioning or reinventing of Iranian or Middle Eastern woman that sharply opposes the stereotyped images of a Middle Eastern woman in the West, an argument which is similar to Marandi and Amiri’s viewpoints as mentioned earlier in part one.

Another account of poor education and knowledge of geography occurs in the chapter entitled “From my Friends,” where a reader may parallel the embarrassing event of Dumas’s first day at school with a similar case on the part of Americans. Dumas finds Americans also lacking the basics of geography. Giving examples of other countries and food, Dumas illustrates how far Americans’ ignorance of other countries may go:

On the topic of Iran, American minds were tabulae rasae. Judging from the questions asked, it was clear that most Americans in 1972 had never heard of Iran. We did our best to educate. “You know Asia? Well, you go south at the Soviet Union and there we are.” Or we’d try to be more bucolic, mentioning being south of the beautiful Caspian Sea, “where the famous caviar comes from.” Most people in Whittier did not know about the famous caviar and once we explained what it was, they’d scrunch up their faces. “Fish eggs?” they would say. “Gross.” We tried

mentioning our proximity to Afghanistan or Iraq, but it was no use. Having exhausted our geographical clues, we would say, “You’ve heard of India, Japan, or China? We’re on the same continent. (*Funny*, 31-32)

Dumas, also, goes on to launch a satire on the American education system by comparing it with the Iranian system of schooling, which apparently offers a more in-depth knowledge, at least in terms of geography subject. Accordingly, the American audience is tempted to take into account the shortcomings of American education system:

In Iran, geography is a requirement in every grade. Since the government issues textbooks, every student studies the same material in the same grade. In first-grade geography, I had to learn the shape of Iran and the location of its capital, Tehran. I had to memorize that we shared borders with Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and the USSR. I also knew that I lived on the continent of Asia. (32)

Dumas, as such, is able to associate the poor knowledge of geography on the part of her classmates with the education system in America. Americans’ treatment of other immigrants is then rooted in the way they learn about the world in school. The question is, “Does Dumas criticize the American education system through the ironic portrayal of American characters?” For one thing, Dumas shows that American children also perform stereotyping at school, where they come off with the attitude that is held against less known nations. As she puts forth,

None of the kids in Whittier, a city an hour outside of Los Angeles, ever asked me about geography. They wanted to know about more important things, such as camels. How many did we own back home? What did we feed them? Was it a bumpy ride? I always disappointed them by admitting that I had never seen a camel in my entire life. And as far as a ride goes, our Chevrolet was rather smooth. They reacted as if I had told them that there really was a person in the Mickey Mouse costume. (32)

By “more important things” Dumas means the opposite and unveils the stereotyped image of Iranians in the eyes of Americans. Dumas points out that Americans expect to see what they were formerly trained in school. To put it in terms of Dumas’s work, the portrayal of Iranians presented to Americans contrasts sharply with what Iranians depict.



Elsewhere, by placing two opposing images of “Camel” and “Chevrolet,” Dumas continues to further endorse her argument. Thus, she suggests that, first, Iranians do not ride camels; second, they drive the same automobiles as many Americans do; and third, Americans totally misunderstand Iranians and their quality of life, all of which lie in their method of education. By doing so, Dumas does not plan to target Iranians as the only subject of her analysis, but she also shows that her examination of characters goes much farther by including people from both countries in her work. However, one aspect of Dumas’s concern with education is still open to debate further: If young Iranian students learn geography early in school, then why Nazireh, Dumas’s mother, does not possess an appropriate knowledge of geography? Why is not Nazireh able to spot her own country on the world map? Is there a contradiction in what Dumas says regarding education system in Iran? Whatever the reason is, one may argue that Dumas does not provide a viable explanation to the problem and yet she proceeds to question the applicability and efficiency of education systems in both countries. To underscore the extent of Americans’ misunderstanding about Iranians, Dumas gives another example that depicts how much Americans are wrong about Iran:

We were also asked about electricity, tents, and the Sahara. Once again, we were disappointed, admitting that we had electricity, that we did not own a tent, and that the Sahara was on another continent. Intent to remedy the image of our homeland as backward, my father took it upon himself to enlighten Americans whenever possible. (32)

As mentioned earlier, a scholar trained in neo-Oriental Studies may find Dumas engaged in skewing Iranians’ intelligence and education in chapter one, especially when she treats her own mother as the object of ridicule. Evaluating Dumas’s work as such may not last long because Dumas goes on to argue that she performed the role of a guide, helping eliminate the wrong image Americans had created about Iran and “remedy[ing] the

image of [her] homeland” (32). It is in the chapter “From my Friends” that Firoozeh alludes to what extent Americans have “a mistaken image of Iran” or why they remember “Lawrence of Arabia” whenever they think of Iran (33). This sort of behavior demonstrates how essentialization works, insofar as one nation, Iran, is likened to a totally different nation, Saudi Arabia. Differences such as these are easily dismissed while the similarities are addressed by way of reducing certain images and ascribing them to certain people. Firoozeh and her father later learn that “Persian cat comes from” Iran, and she could introduce Iran by referring to it as the land of Persian cats, which generates a smile and furthers the sense of humor (33). It is yet quite ironical as to why an American woman teaches them where Persian cats originally come from. It is ironical in the sense that Americans do not adequately know about Iran, but they know of something that an Iranian may not be aware of. The lack of consistency in and accuracy of representing the image of a country such as Iran on the part of Americans proves how selectively they are taught on the subject. The “Persian cats” example can unveil how much certain facts about a country, like Iran, might appeal to Americans. Hence, irony presents itself very vigorously in this chapter when Firoozeh sets out to represent Iran through the prism of both Americans and Iranians. By probably rousing a smile to the reader, Firoozeh says,

I tried my best to be a worthy representative of my homeland, but, like a Hollywood celebrity relentlessly pursued by paparazzi, I sometimes got tired of the questions. I, however, never punched anybody with my fists; I used words. (33)

Then, as Firoozeh thinks, it is the power of words that can rectify a wrong image and it is in words, in fact, that someone should be able to remove the misconceptions. One may assert that it is Firoozeh’s purpose to represent a better image of Iran in words and in humor, but not in violence, as in “punch[ing].” Meanwhile, one may contend that Dumas

casts a country such as Saudi Arabia to cleverly suggest how simplistically Americans view the Middle East by recognizing the country as perhaps the only owner of oil and the birthplace of Islam. “Camel” is yet an image wrongly attributed to Iran, which again highlights how distorted an image Americans may have about a non-Arab country like Iran.

Elsewhere, in the chapter titled ‘Bernice,’ Dumas brings the issue of geography along with immigrants’ appearance. As one can observe, the two components associate and form a deeper irony. On the one hand, using comparisons again, such as “Nicole Kidman,” “porcelain,” and “fish-belly white” (37)– the last phrase is a synecdoche – Dumas sets out to touch upon a lighter function of satire, ludic, yet she wittily goes on to unravel serious matters that, otherwise, lie within her work.

There is one last point to be mentioned here before moving on to the next section in this chapter, and that is the problem of communication and English language. While both memoirs more or less engage in stressing the importance of English language in establishing social ties between immigrants and their host country, *Funny in Farsi* looks more closely into this matter. Firoozeh’s parents’ inability to connect with Americans lies in their failure to exercise the language of the recipient society. This stands out early in the first chapter of the memoir entitled Leffingwell Elementary School, where the text shows both parents in awkward situations. Meanwhile, this chapter puts forth a dramatic irony when the reader understands the depth and graveness of the problem. Firoozeh’s father, Kazem, takes pride in his daughter’s ability to recite a series of useless words in English. As Firoozeh recounts the day she was enrolled in school, “Eager to impress Mrs. Sandberg, he [Kazem] asked me to demonstrate my knowledge of English language. I

stood up straight and proudly recited all that I knew: “White, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green”” (4). Thus, Dumas develops a dramatic irony by way of presenting a substantial discrepancy between her characters’ unawareness of their action and speech and the audiences’ awareness of the situation. In presenting mispronounced words or the words that do not exist in either Farsi or English, the text gives a number of examples that rightly focus on the common linguistic problems both Iranians and Americans encounter, such as Iranian parents’ inability to pronounce ‘w’ and ‘th’ sounds as compared with Americans’ inability to pronounce ‘gh’ or ‘kh’ sounds (11, 62-63). There is also another humorous instance that depicts Nazireh giving souvenirs and gifts to her neighbors, but it is the text’s transcription of accent and pronunciation is very interesting: “Dees eez from my countay-ree. Es-pay-shay-ley for you” (35). All these examples and excerpts that I have mentioned above suggest the need for a second level of reading or an ironic level, and a connotative inference that, if deciphered, means that language stands as a major obstacle for migrants.

### ***Laughing without an Accent***

In the chapter entitled “Eight Days a Week,” Dumas draws a fine line between education in Iran and America. This chapter is insightful for an American audience, while for an Iranian audience this chapter presents an ordinary account of education in the country. However, the age Dumas places her story in is some forty years old, which differs from the way schooling is today in Iran. In this chapter, Dumas discusses how they were overwhelmed by a large number of homework exercises, which was enough to “keep [them] busy eight days of a week” (45). The title, as such, makes a reference to the homework overload in the then Iran. She also talks about the rigid rules and principles,

teachers' high expectations of students, and all the difficult subjects they had to study at school (45-46). The significant impact of Persian poets, such as Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Saadi, is also expressed in a couple of pages (46-48), in which Dumas not only talks about their metaphorical languages, but also about the reading curriculum at school. An American audience learns that Iranians highly appreciate their poets and poetry, insofar as they use their poetry in many occasions and recite the lines for each other. There is also a list of renowned Western writers that was part of the former curriculum. It is an indication of the fact that the then education system valued both Western and Persian literatures (48). Despite all the admirable qualities of schools, Dumas ironically says how someone could get around the strict rules and bend the law by nepotism. Getting into some high standard schools required the applicants to take an entrance exam, which Dumas obviously went for and failed. Her father, though, "called someone who knew someone who knew someone. The next day, he received another phone call from the head of the school, "Congratulations, Mr. Jazayeri, he said, 'your daughter is gifted'" (50-51). An American audience may either be surprised or remember a similar story, but an Iranian audience may not want such an embarrassing story to be told in a memoir. The humorous aspects of the story may be lost as the content comes to clash sharply with the author's technique of tending to be witty. Despite Dumas's attempt to constitute an irony that must be read through its 'unsaid meaning,' the Iranian reader may fix his or her attention on the offense Kazem committed in order to unfairly get her daughter admitted at school. The aesthetic quality of humor, instead, needs to be addressed by a critic, yet there are some Iranian critics inside Iran who have held a different perspective towards Dumas's text.

## 2. Consumerism

### *Funny in Farsi*

Dumas's memoirs render a light criticism of consumerism and unhealthy diets through cultural practices pertaining to food preparation in America. In fact, in *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without an Accent* food serves to reveal the culture on culinary and eating habits levels as they are tied to distinct ethnic groups. In the episode "Swoosh-Swoosh" in *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas initially portrays the differences in cooking styles, equipping the audience with various aspects of Iranian culture. The description of food preparation in Iran is filled with so many details that the American reader may find Iranian cooking style very laborious, time-consuming, yet very savory:

In Iran, meal preparation took up half of each day, starting early in the morning with my mother telling our servant, Zahra, which vegetables to clean and cut. The vegetables were either grown in our garden or had been purchased the day before. The ingredients in our meals were limited to what was in season. Summer meant eggplant or okra stew, fresh tomatoes, and tiny cucumbers that I would peel and salt. Winter meant celery or rhubarb stew, cilantro, parsley, fenugreek, and my favorite fruit, sweet lemon, which is a thin-skinned, aromatic citrus not found in America. There was no such thing as canned, frozen, or fast food. Everything, except for bread, which was purchased daily, was made from scratch. Eating meant having to wait for hours for all the ingredients to blend together just right. When the meal was finally ready, we all sat together and savored the sensuous experience of a delicious Persian meal. (25)

Hence, the reader realizes that food preparation in Iran is different from that in America. However, the irony lies in the last sentence when Dumas ends the paragraph with a sentence that is loaded with an implied meaning: "Upscale restaurants in America, calling themselves 'innovative and gourmet,' prepare food the way we used to. In Iran, it was simply how everybody ate" (25-26). The surprises and pauses that an American audience may develop after reading this section speak to the embedded irony. An

American reader may ask a series of questions, such as “How can it be that an Iranian family spent most of their daily time in the kitchen?”; “Is it because life in Iran is much easier?”; “Do Iranians have much time to spend on preparing food every day?” Still, an Iranian audience may pose the following questions: “How else do Americans prepare their food?”; “Does typical Iranian food made every day in Iran equal to American food prepared in luxurious restaurants in terms of quality and time?” It is, therefore, this implied meaning that functions to evaluate both cultures. The questions that may arise in an audience’s minds evince the ironic and the dialogic aspects of Dumas’s work quite explicitly. Ironic in the sense that there are other levels of meaning besides the surface meaning, and dialogic in the sense that the work creates a forum for the questions concerning divergent voices and attitudes when reading the work. In the case of characters and their behavior, Firoozeh’s father and uncle play key roles in representing Iranian culture as well as the influence of American culture on them. Firoozeh’s father, Kazem, and her uncle, Nematollah, are first fascinated by American canned food and fast food. But, her uncle later finds his health in jeopardy, deciding to go on a diet to lose weight:

A couple of months after my uncle’s arrival, he realized that somehow none of the clothes in his suitcase fit him... Unable to button his shirts, he sucked in his gut and tried not to exhale. My father tried to help him with the various buttons, zippers, and snaps, which refused to button, zip, or snap. (27)

Thus, Dumas employs irony and light criticism to target Americans’ eating habits that may even affect the immigrants who live their lives in a traditional fashion. It is, therefore, through the characterization of her uncle that Dumas reaches for an underlying theme that constitutes the backbone of her narrative.

*Laughing without an Accent*

There are certain chapters, such as “His and Hers” and “Past the Remote,” that specifically dwell upon the negative aspects of consumerism and modern life. As to the former, the story begins with how effectively an individual, here Kazem, can be manipulated by commercial gimmicks and tricked into purchasing the goods he is not even in need of: “There are only few things in life that cause sheer jubilation in my father, and clearance sales are one of them” (58). Dumas continues to accentuate the ironic point by showing the gravitation to the luxury of consumerism: “At the time, my father drove a Buick LeSabre, a fancy French word meaning ‘OPEC thanks you’” (58). Wittily the work suggests that Kazem is well attuned to the culture of consumerism, which offers enchanting technology to the customers, but at the same time demands them to pour more money into the system for the facilities. As the reader keeps reading the text, he comes to understand that Kazem is a cog in the machine of capitalism whose discourse of consumerism is unavoidable, so much so that he pays for the furniture which he later pays again to get rid of, “Finally, my father called a handyman and offered him a hundred dollars to remove the furniture. The handyman agreed” (67). Thus, the text develops an irony throughout this whole chapter to delve into an incident or situation that every ordinary citizen of America might have experienced, but one should also note that it is the characterization of Dumas’s father, Kazem, that reinforces the latent theme.

The chapter “Past the Remote,” the story is about Firoozeh’s married life, in which she and her husband, Francois, try to get rid of TV because they want to “have conversations that last longer than three commercials, raise kids who will be responsible for their own entertainment, and do whatever else humans did before twenty-four-hour



TV” (119). A simplistic reading of this quote can represent Firoozeh trying to abandon a bad habit. However, when read more closely, the text constantly makes references to how hard it is to break from the engaging and addictive aspects of modern life and suggests how media can control humans’ manners and induce new habits. The text pictures the old days in Abadan, Iran, where Iranians only “had access to one Iranian TV station and one from Kuwait,” and they enjoyed the freedom of spending more time together (120). Elsewhere, Dumas also confesses how addictive the TV shows are, “It was not until I became a mother that I found myself enchanted by Elmo, Oscar the Grouch, Big Bird, and Fred Rogers and his gentle ways. These shows are a valid reason for *having* a TV” (emphasis in the text, 121). As to the benefits of not watching TV, Firoozeh explains that,

Amazingly, our children had finally noticed our backyard, which had never beckoned them before. They surprised me with their new-found creativity. My daughter had discovered that junk mail could be cut and glued and made into all sorts of artwork, defined in our household as anything made by our children. We perhaps became the only family in America who looked forward to unsolicited credit card applications. (125)

The text above crafts irony by indicating that TV and, perhaps, any similar form of media can hinder children from learning appropriately and that in the absence of TV children can boost their creativity. The whole narrative is told in a conversational and humorous language, which when read between the lines, offers a myriad of ideas and inferences. This chapter ends with yet another witty reference to TV ads and trademarks. Firoozeh’s son is unaware of “Toys’R’US” name while “one of his classmates had suggested an enormous toy store” (126). Firoozeh’s son even had a wrong name on his mind when he came to the mother and told her “It’s called We Are Toys” (126). On the one hand, by showing this, the text makes possible the understanding of living away from mediated discourses in a consumer society, and on the other, it depicts how a domestic discourse

can resist the prevailing discourses of media, albeit in the confined sphere of family.

Thus, the text renders a space where the centrifugal force – Firoozeh’s plan – challenges the centripetal force – commercial gimmicks, consumerism, and the consumer society’s culture.

### 3. Copyright, Translation, and Censorship

*Laughing without an Accent* begins with the problems facing the author attempting to publish her first memoir *Funny in Farsi* in Iran. In fact, the text recapitulates on a number of issues, so that the reader can get to know what copyright laws, translation, and censorship are like in Iran. An American audience, in particular, realizes that “Iran does not currently adhere to international copyright laws,” meaning that “any book, regardless of origin, can be translated into Persian and sold in Iran” (3). She then goes on to unfold the task of a translator, who might take advantage of this opportunity and translate a book the way suits himself or herself, hence there are many poorly translated books. As a result, the fate of an original copy remains highly in the hands of a translator. The example the memoir gives – Abbas Milani’s case (3) – in the first chapter may shock a reader, alluding to what extent an author, especially the one based abroad, is easily ignored in the context of copyright laws in Iran. Dumas also provides the reader with another example – Harry Potter (3-4) – that can echo the range of catastrophe in the field of translation.

Aware of “such horror stories,” Dumas took cautious steps towards her first memoir *Funny in Farsi*, in order to avoid being treated as the subject of criticism for her contents, hence she “was very careful not to cross the line into anything embarrassing or

insulting” (4). Dumas then explains her purpose of writing the first memoir as follows; “My goal was to have the subjects of my story laugh with me, not cringe and want to move to Switzerland under assumed names,” although she had predicted that “a translated version might make [her] family look like fools” (4). Once again, one can follow the tide of oppositional voices and/or dissenting forces that might deploy against an author from the audiences and critics. Additionally, one should note the cultural meanings and connotations that go with each culture, so much so that the expressions and jokes that may be meaningful and hilarious in once specific culture may not be so in another. As Dumas puts it in *Laughing without an Accent*, “Humor, like poetry, is culture-specific and does not always work in translation. What’s downright hilarious in one culture may draw blank stares in another” (4). To be precise, humor that has come down to us from many centuries ago has well gone through the filters of several eras and cultures. It is no surprise then that humor cannot easily navigate between times and countries. As to the component of culture, Hertzler concurs that cultural conditions impact laughter, arguing that each culture carries,

distinctive social, economic, political and intellectual history; its own fundamental values; its own distinctive social codes – folkways, mores, manners, customs, conventions, and laws; its own logic; its own ideology ... its own peculiar complex of social institutions in large part setting the behavior patterns of its people in almost every department of life. (50)

By the same token, Dumas pokes into humour as a culture-specific phenomenon by giving a number of examples from her experience in America:

When we came to America, my family could not figure out why a pie thrown in someone’s face was funny. The laugh tracks told us it was supposed to be hilarious, but we thought it was obnoxious. We also saw it as a terrible waste of food, a real no-no for anyone from any country in the world except for the United States. (4)

Therefore, Dumas brings up the irony that is linked to ‘unsaid aspect’, to put it in Hutcheon’s terms, by putting forth as to how we might laugh at a joke or a scene in America, whereas the very scene may not be funny to an Iranian audience. Meanwhile, Dumas raises the ‘relational’ aspect of irony by viewing humour in connection to the network of meanings and the audiences. She goes on and on in her discussing the subject by still enumerating other instances:

We were also baffled by Carol Burnett’s Tarzan yell. Anyone who watched her show regularly knew that during the audience question-and-answer section, one person inevitably ask her to do her Tarzan yell. We always hoped she would say, “Not tonight.” But instead, she would let out a loud and long yell that left the audience in stitches and us bewildered. (4-5)

Dumas’s argument of culture-specificity of humour does not end here, but she puts her analysis in a global terrain, as well, by which she demonstrates how we laugh at similar themes and subjects:

There is also something funny universally about the contrast between a short and tall man, which was played out with Harvey Korman. Given that most of the men in my family are closer in height to Tim Conway than to Harvey Korman, I assume there was among us [her family] a nervous understanding of the foibles of the short man. (5)

Then, Dumas proceeds to look at the problems a translator runs into when he or she sets out to convey the humorous tone from one culture to another. Business gimmicks and catch phrases such as “Shake ‘n Bake” and “The Price is Right” may sound unfamiliar to an Iranian audience. All these make the work of a translator even harder as the phrases in America carry a specific American cultural undertone that may hardly be understandable to an Iranian reading public. She had to exchange a number of emails with her translator, Mohammad Soleimani Nia, and correct his mistakes in translation, so that he would realize the connotations that exist in American culture:

Some of Mohammad's mistakes revealed what life is like in the Middle East. In one story, I mentioned "eyes meeting across a room and va va va boom." This was translated as "eyes meeting across the room and bombs going off." I had to explain to Mohammad that, in America, "boom" is love. (7)

This was an easy enlightenment Dumas performed with this expression because there are other culture-specific expressions in America that can spur political connotation, which will completely mislead the Iranian audience. As she continues,

In a story about Christmas, I wrote about "the bearded fellow" coming down people's chimneys. Mohammad translated this literally. In Iran, however, a "bearded fellow" coming down the chimney is not a happy thought. The idea going to bed so a bearded man, Khomeini perhaps, can come down the chimney would not cause visions of sugarplums dancing in anyone's head. (7)

In regards to the title of the first memoir, Dumas states that *Funny in Farsi* might make sense to an American audience, but the Iranian audience would not understand the "humorous alliteration", thus the translated version was titled "*Atre Sombol, Atre Koj*, meaning *The Scent of Hyacinths, the Scent of Pine*, which refers to the contrasting smells of the holidays" (7). The irony, as Hutcheon affirms, can be 'relational' and 'differential.' It is relational as it occurs at the social level, that is, between people, texts, readers, and or between meanings and inferences. It is differential as one single concept is not solely at work, but multiple concepts come together to shape meaning. Here, the unsaid level of meaning stands out and challenges the said level. Thus, it is essentially the social network of author/text/interpreter alongside the latent meaning that come into play and constitute two major aspects of irony.

As to censorship carried out to Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*, one can invoke the "aggregative" function of irony, to use Hutcheon's terminology again (Hutcheon, 54-55). This function comprises exclusionary and inclusionary practices laid down by authority that maintains or eliminates certain sections or discourses. Accordingly, by reading the

chapter “The Ham Amendment,” one can discover how differently a certain food is viewed in different cultures. However, this is not only the ham that is treated as a forbidden food, but also the idea of ham as a counter-discourse to Islam that effectively undergoes revision by the state-run Bureau of Censorship, based in the Ministry of Culture in Iran. In general, ham is forbidden in Islam and the religion openly orders Muslims to avoid eating pork. However, Firoozeh’s father, Kazem, consumes it on a regular basis. The paradox arises when the American audience comes, first, to learn that ham is Haram – forbidden – and, second, to understand that a Muslim can practice something that opposes the doctrines of a certain religion. It is exactly this level of ham, representing a Muslim consuming a Haram food that the Bureau does not tend to be discovered by the Iranian audience. This chapter evidently illuminates how heteroglossia presents itself in Dumas’s text; Kazem’s decentralizing or centrifugal voice challenges not only the Iranian government’s unifying and centripetal voice but also Sharia’s straightforward and one-directional doctrines. Kazem, as such, may stand as a bad Muslim or a Westernized Muslim to a Muslim audience while he, at the same time, exemplifies the extent to which a Muslim can be influenced by American culture. Both American and Iranian reading publics may be surprised to learn that this chapter was completely removed from the Farsi version, which is still published in Iran. The book has never been banned in Iran but it has been privileged to reach the fifth edition. This fact might also surprise an American audience on how an Iranian-American writer based in America can get her book published in the Islamic Republic, which is a country dominantly thought to be as one of most hard-to-be-published countries. Dumas also mentions the reason why her book was extensively read by the youth inside Iran. She

confronts her editor with the same question to which he replies, “Your stories are funny, but the way you write about nationalities—you don’t make one bad and one good. We don’t hate Americans,” he said. He told me that he wanted Americans to know this” (10).

One may argue that Firoozeh’s neutral attitude toward Islamic Republic and theocracy, and her literary endeavour to steer clear of topics such as politics and religion earned her the opportunity to get her work published in Iran. However, the voices and meanings underneath the surface meanings convey messages that prove otherwise. It is the irony in Dumas’s texts that runs vigorously beyond the words and humorous adventures. Another example of irony and heteroglossia occurs in the first chapter of Dumas’s *Laughing without an Accent* entitled “Funny in Persian”:

No movie or book can be made in Iran without approval from the government. Although there are no written guidelines stating exactly what is prohibited, common sense dictates that in an Islamic theocracy, nudity, profanity, insulting the religion or government, and perhaps anything having to do with Paris Hilton are all no-nos. (8)

The name “Paris Hilton,” which is quite familiar to the American audience may evoke a smile while it connotes that the mention of an American celebrity may also cause trouble for the publication of a book in Iran. Thus, Dumas implicitly indicates a couple of things; First of all, a writer tending to publish in Iran needs to be super-cautious about incorporating the contents in his or her book that do not infringe upon the Iranian government’s red line. Second, it is hard to specifically demarcate where the red line is, except for the commonly known prohibitions.

This chapter demands a close reading because Dumas smartly dabbles in the subjects that are connected to publishing and the pertaining Islamic laws pursued in Iran. That is why she brings up issues such as censorship, copyright, and translation. One can

see it is too hard a task to get a book published in Iran and yet to be acclaimed. Surprisingly, though, Dumas won an award in Iran and was invited to attend a ceremony. She could not participate in the awards ceremony, but her translator “accepted the award on [her] behalf” (10). Hence, thanks to her humorous tone that steeps in metaphor and irony, Dumas is able to delve into serious issues, such as the problem of censorship in Iran.

Mohammad Soleimani Nia, the translator, was successful in conveying to the Iranian audience several aspects of American culture. His eloquent and smooth Farsi translation remains to a large extent faithful to Dumas’s book, and through his correspondences to the author, Soleimani Nia tried to perform the least controversial translation. Dumas’s choice of the word “amendment” deserves notice as it contains not only biblical allusion but refers also to Kazem’s arbitrary and voluntary decision in ignoring the Sharia law and turning it to his own interest. In an interview, Firoozeh explains that this chapter was her favorite chapter in the book, without which her book misses out an important theme. One can recall the Bakhtinian conception of the dialogic and heteroglossia by assuming the will of the Bureau to be the dominant discourse or the centripetal force, while the author’s voice to be of a lower force. As such, in the Farsi version, the authoritative position of the state exists, whereas in the original copy, it is the authorial position, that is, Dumas’s intellectual grounds, that have given her the liberty to express her opinions, regardless of the editorial revisions. Heteroglossia in this sense suggests that dominant and subordinate languages stem from the social inequality and that the two languages grapple in a dialogic conflict for authority (Bakhtin, 1981: 272). As Bakhtin posits, a dominant discourse, which is “authoritative word” is the product of



“religious, political, moral; the word of the father and its authority was already acknowledged in the past” (342).

The American audience may not be aware of the elimination of this chapter in Iran; neither is the ordinary Iranian audience inside Iran, unless they have read *Laughing without an Accent*. It is the third group of the reading public, though, that comes to realize the censorship by comparing the two books and/or by following the Dumas’s interviews. As Dumas’s interviews are entirely in English, the third group of readers may, to a large degree, be either educated Iranians, living inside or outside Iran, or it may consist of Americans who take an interest in learning about other cultures and ethnic minorities in the US. This third group conveniently distinguishes the differences between the two published books. Despite the hegemonic voice of the state that unifies and homogenizes all the existing voices, it is Dumas’s voice in *Laughing without an Accent* and her subsequent interviews that serve as the centrifugal force, resisting the force from the above to some extent. One can advocate this viewpoint and adhere to Bakhtin’s framework, but still the answer Kazem gives to Firoozeh is quite insightful. Firoozeh learns about Islamic laws and does not want her father to be “destined to a very bad place for a very long time” (86). Therefore, she tells Kazem what she had learned at school.

However, Kazem responds as follows:

Firoozeh, when the Prophet Muhammad forbade ham, it was because people did not know how to cook it properly and many people became sick as a result of eating it. The Prophet, who was a kind and gentle man, wanted to protect people from harm, so he did what made sense at the time. But now, people know how to prepare ham safely, so if the Prophet were alive today, he would change that rule.” He continued, “It’s not what we eat or don’t eat that makes us good people; it’s how we treat one another. As you grow older, you’ll find that people of every religion think they’re the best, but that’s not true. There are good and bad people in every religion. Just because someone is Muslim, Jewish, or Christian doesn’t mean

a thing. You have to look and see what's in their hearts. That's the only thing that matters, and that's the only detail God cares about. (87-88)

The paragraph above allows for a more lenient attitude toward Islam, while at the same time, it questions the seemingly indomitable and impenetrable discourse of Islam. Kazem cites that Muslims' Prophet would change his opinion if he lived today, which may also be considered a profane opinion. Thus, Kazem's way of looking at Islam opposes the prescribed dicta and ideology of religion. The fact that Firoozeh does not provide more explanation on why ham is a forbidden food leaves the influx of possible views quite open. Whether ham is a delicious food or may cause specific diseases, as Muslims regularly argue, the way Kazem approaches the question and the way he tries to console Firoozeh should be taken into consideration. Kazem's reasoning that the disciples of every religion will be judged by their "hearts" or by the way they "treat each other" fashions a secular type of thinking. By doing so, the unsaid aspect of irony – that not all Muslims are religious but there are exceptions, as well – presents itself, insofar as religion is downplayed and the whole focus is shifted to humanity, instead. Kazem, to put it another way, considers a human's conduct and attitude to occupy a higher status than religion does, hence Kazem's discourse is persuasive and subversive. Perhaps, this chapter was Dumas's favorite because there is a chunk of dissenting voices that come to complicate each other with respect to Islamic and secular grounds. To be more precise, this chapter provides enough room for liberal and secular discourses that come into a conflict with Islamic ideology. Nonetheless, one should not forget the fact that Dumas explains the entire problem of censorship with levity and inserts a humorous comment made by her father. The essential scope of humanity combined with humor as intended by Dumas becomes even more perceptible in the following paragraph:

When I told my father about the removal of that particular chapter, he was very upset. He said it was probably because the censor did not believe in shared humanity, at least not with the Jews. My father also added my next book should be entitled, “Accomplishments of Jews I Have Known,” interspersed with recipes using hams. (9)

Once again, the way Kazem approaches a religious matter is interesting as it is combined with novelty and humour. Kazem brings Jews to his discussion at the culinary level, a ham recipe. He combines the Jews and ham as two topics that are barely talked about in Iran, and ironically tries to say that Dumas should not back down, but should, instead, continue with publishing further works in Iran, no matter how hard the censorship is exercised.

#### **4. Reading Hybridity in Humor**

In her memoirs, Firoozeh Dumas humorously incorporates her life story in a collection of anecdotes that emulates the Scheherazadian archetypal model of storytelling. In so doing, Dumas merges American humor with Persian storytelling in an attempt to produce an artefact that carries an Iranian American hybrid identity. While employing humor to bestow creativity upon her works, Dumas creates counter-narratives that humanize Iranians in the post-9/11 era. Dumas’s anecdotes are narrated with fluidity and anachronism through which the works afford an utmost elasticity in transporting the reader to pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary eras. In each chapter, the reader comes to encounter a new story that replenishes and enhances the thematic level of the narratives and, as such, they entertain the audiences. As Scheherazade, who managed to foil King Shahryar’s killing plan by installing cringe-inducing stories fraught with suspense, Dumas’s memoirs attempt to counteract stereotyping, racial discrimination,

and essentialization exercised against Muslims, Iranians, the Middle Easterners, non-White populations, and minorities.

Another aspect of Dumas's works that deals with stylistic hybridity is self-deprecation, which is a technique extensively employed in American humor. That is, the works benefit from sarcasm to a large degree in deprecating the narrator's self-portrait, a technique that suits American comedy rather than Persian humorous gestures. Thus, Dumas's humour is loaded with a number of themes, ranging from immigration, assimilation, racism, cultural representation, identity, and gender issues. It is a simplistic reading of Dumas's work to say that the memoirs solely embark on a single project throughout her work, that is, to familiarize the reader with both American and Iranian cultural grounds, differences, and values. In fact, her memoirs do so by posing themselves as valuable sources of information and attitudes. Yet, one needs to read between the lines and single out the sort of irony the texts incorporate. Beyond the sphere of surface meanings and plain recollections, Dumas's works are very profoundly rich in hybrid images of both cultures. That is to say, cultural practices are articulated in a network of hybrid possibilities. First of all, migrancy is an important theme in the work that runs the plots of the work. One should not forget that Dumas's writings exist because her family moved to the United States and that the incidents following immigration are reported in the context of setting and era in which the relocation occurred. However, Iranian cultural practices carry a rigorous American blend as they are pursued away from Iran. As Neil Lazarus puts forth, "Migrancy has a double perspective that nothing is fixed, that the truth is relative, that 'no knowledge can ever be certain'" (248). That is why Dumas juxtaposes Nowruz with Christmas, Thanksgiving with Iranian gatherings,

Iranian cuisines with American food, Iranian hobbies with American pursuits, and so on. Ironically, Dumas indicates that Iranian culture in the United States does not remain untouched and pure but it presents itself in a hybrid form. Lazarus's definition of migrancy is consistent with Hutcheon's conception of irony in that the multiple levels of irony, especially its unsaid aspect, do not promise a definitive inference at the end of the day. Thus, one should seek irony of the works as conveyed through the levels of migrancy and hybridity. According to Bhabha, hybridity exhibits the "necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (Tiffin 9).

In *Laughing without an Accent*, there is a chapter entitled "The Jester and I," which opens with a straightforward mention of the state of liminality and ambivalence that are the part and parcel of hybridity:

Most immigrants agree that at some point, we become permanent foreigners, belonging neither here nor there. Many tomes have been written trying to describe this feeling of floating between worlds but never fully landing. Artists, using every known medium from words to film to Popsicle sticks, have attempted to encapsulate the struggle of trying to hang on to the solid ground of our mother culture and realizing that we are merely in a pond balancing on a lily pad with a big kid about to belly-flop right in. If and when we fall into this pond, will we be singularly American or will we hyphenate? Can we hold on to anything or does our past just end up at the bottom of the pond, waiting to be discovered by future generations? (68)

In a poetic way, the text raises serious issues regarding identity crisis and migrants' ambivalence. Still, Dumas raises critical questions and uses a technique that keeps the reader pondering different aspects of one's ethnic identity. One may think that the narrator posits her viewpoints and leaves decision-making on the reader. Another may also argue that the narrator is caught between the two cultural discourses of Iranian and American identities. That is, while she looks back to her roots and still lives in the sweet

old days, she has adopted American culture, so much so that she has spent longer years in the United States and a large part of her identity is constructed in a non-Persian society. The text, as such, brings up the problem of self-assertion, assimilation, and identity, all of which are related to the state of liminality and ambivalence. Therefore, Dumas's text is a favorable battlefield for such discursive challenges and contestations. It is also likely that the other reader thinks of the narrator as a person who is entrapped in triple identities because she is an Iranian-American who has adopted a French last name, thanks to being married to a French man. This viewpoint may have preoccupied the Iranian reader right from the beginning of the memoir when he or she thinks, "This is not an Iranian last name. Then, what is it?" All these show how one's reading may proceed according to his or her social, cultural, ethnic, and gender backgrounds, expectations, experiences, tastes, etc. In brief, the broader the contexts and discursive dimensions, the more engaged the reader and more varied his or her interpretations.

In *Funny in Farsi*, too, the same state of in-between-ness finds its way in the tolerance of other foreign cultures on the part of Americans, but wittily on the culinary level: "Despite a few exceptions, I have found that Americans are now far more willing to learn new names, just as they're far more willing to try new ethnic foods" or elsewhere when the text continues, "It's like adding a few new spices to the kitchen pantry. Move over, cinnamon and nutmeg, make way for cardamom and sumac." (63, 67) By way of a metaphoric exercise of spices and flavours from both cultures, the memoir shows how the merger of the two can yet create something more creative, colorful, and savory. Once again, this can be interpreted in view of hybridity and dialogism, both of which can be etched on the ironic level of the text. There is yet another reference in *Funny in Farsi* that

combines imagery –smell and flavor—with cultural practices and traditions. One may assume that the Farsi title *The Scent of Hyacinth*, *The Scent of Pine* is derived from this excerpt, truly representing the hybridity the text aims to elucidate: “My Christmas kitchen smells of ginger, chocolate, and cinnamon. In my childhood kitchen, Nowruz smelled of cardamom, roasted pistachios, and rose water” (109). The metaphoric significance finds way again in the juxtaposition of Western and Eastern/exotic flavors yet this time in certain cultural occasions. By doing so, the text allows for a more open and hybrid reception of distinct cultural practices.

All in all, the influx of discourses merged and projected in a double-mask of identity bring the ironic level of the texts to the fore. In the case of the narrator’s cultural transformation and the type of transition that begins with Firoozeh Jazayeri and moves on to Julie Jazayeri and finally to Julie Dumas – a feigned European ancestry – one can also find Dumas caught up in the negation of her ethnic identity, but again this is another level of reading that can occur in the memoir. Dumas’s texts, as such, contain a compound type of irony in that the reading public travels through different levels of meaning and still ponders what else the texts communicate or whether all the obtained meanings are valid and viable.

### **III. The Talks and Inferences: The Media, the Public, and the Constructed Images**

By including Dumas’ talks in my thesis I attempt to uncover the writer’s intention of producing the memoirs, which in turn unfolds her worldview and the cluster of meanings the contexts of her works also carry to the audiences. In her talks, Dumas suggests that American media play a pivotal role in spreading the common

misunderstandings about Middle Easterners and Muslims, in general, and Iranians, in particular. More importantly, the talks and the contexts collectively partake in the perception of Dumas's texts and the unmasking of unsaid meanings. In other words, these recorded interviews/talks shed light on the author's critical notions regarding the impact of media on the public, the exercise of stereotyping, common misconceptions about Iranians, and raising Americans' consciousness about various ethnic minorities in America. For this reason, I have selected the talks that basically deal with the recurrent themes which suggest it is the reader's responsibility to single out ironic inferences in Dumas's speech.

### 1. The 2004 Television Talk on *Funny in Farsi*<sup>42</sup>

In a talk in 2004, Firoozeh Dumas explains that she wrote her *Funny in Farsi* for her children and that her father used to tell her stories when she was a child. Her father then was "the muse,"<sup>43</sup> as the interviewer calls, who inspired her to write her book. She continues that her father first came to America on a Fulbright scholarship, and that in 1972 when her family "came to the United States, nobody had heard of Iran."<sup>44</sup> Dumas also says that she was seven years old and rather an "observer"<sup>45</sup> who would follow her mother around. Her stories, then, are a recollection of the observations she performed at the time. In response to the question, "What were some of biggest challenges for you trying to acclimate here in the United States?"<sup>46</sup> Dumas responds that the English language was the major problem because she and her mother "did not speak any English, but children pick up languages so quickly, so that wasn't really hard for me. For my

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8neBDLE-kNY> (accessed on June 30, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>44</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>45</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>46</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).



mother, it was very difficult, and she still doesn't speak all that well."<sup>47</sup> She goes on to say that "grocery shopping" was very challenging for her and her mother because they did not know English. Therefore, they had to go by "the pictures on the boxes."<sup>48</sup> Dumas mentions that they were "experimenting" everything in America, especially certain occasions, such as "Halloween."<sup>49</sup> Dumas adds that they were not aware of the customs and that

No one told us that kids would come to our house asking for candy ... we are sitting at home at Halloween. We hear 'knock, knock,' and then, there's a bunch of kids saying, 'trick or treat'! we say, what is this? ... there's these little things that Americans take for granted, but there's no 'how-to' when you immigrate to this country, and you have figure out all that on your own.<sup>50</sup>

Christmas, as another occasion, is not celebrated by Iranians, and it was "a lonely time for them," sitting at home and "watching all the Christmas Specials."<sup>51</sup> One can read unsaid meanings in Dumas's views as follows; First of all, the language of the host society stands as the primary impediment facing immigrant families. Dumas states the very problem in the first chapter of *Funny in Farsi* entitled Leffingwell Elementary School, as well. However, both in the book and the interview, she shows that the second generation and/or the children of the immigrant families do not experience the same degree of difficulty in acquiring the language because they are faster learners than their parents are. This is concerned with the factor of age between the two generations. Second, immigrants in the host society confront the customs and traditions different from those practiced in their homeland. America's cultural practices raised the awareness of

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<sup>47</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>48</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>49</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>50</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>51</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

Dumas's family and provided them with the means to integrate in the recipient society. Hybridity, as well, emerges as one of the implications of the convergence of the host and home cultures where the trends of host culture exist alongside immigrant family's culture. Dumas also says that her parents travel to Iran each year, but they no longer bring back Iranian "goodies,"<sup>52</sup> the term mentioned by the interviewer. Dumas continues that, "Ironically, there's Persian goods everywhere,"<sup>53</sup> thanks to Persian grocery stores and restaurants. Dumas's statement can be read in regards to the multicultural and hybrid spirit of American society. Multiculturalism becomes meaningful in this sense when there are multiple diasporic communities living in America and considering the country as their home. The presence of Iranian stores attests to the fact that Iranians have been serving their own community along with the mainstream population for a while. Hence, concepts, such as hybridity, diaspora, and multiculturalism are indicated in Dumas's speech, which are the ironic inferences one can grasp. Even Dumas herself uses the term "ironically," as mentioned above, when she compares the now and then America, admitting that there have been dramatic changes across America for the past three or four decades.

Regarding misunderstandings about Iranians, Dumas states that American products were worshiped by Iranians, and that "Iranians worship America. It is just the misconception that a lot of Americans think that Iranians hate America. It's the complete opposite. They worship America. Now, the government is different, but the government does not represent the people."<sup>54</sup> Ironically, Dumas is suggesting the extent to which a

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<sup>52</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>53</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>54</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

nation, such as America, is uninformed of another nation, Iran, which is known to be its enemy. By the same token, Dumas is touching upon a serious matter, which is to do with the media and its impact on the American public. Dumas shows how much ignorance and miscommunication between Iran and America can affect the relations between the people of both countries, especially as she says Iranians adore America and American products. The interviewer then humorously interjects, “That’s kind of like what’s happening here,”<sup>55</sup> by which he means the opposite. In this regard, the interviewer uses a verbal irony, indicating that Americans do not adore Iranians and their products. In fact, the interviewer implies that Americans are completely unaware of the sort of feeling Iranians have for them.

The interviewer also mentions that it is hard for him to distinguish between the Persian and Arab cultures and asks Dumas to elaborate on the differences. Dumas responds

Iranians are Indo-European race, so we look different than Arabs. I mean, our cultures are very different ... people think all the Middle East are Arabs, and there are very distinct cultures within each country. And even the name Persian and Iran, people ask me that all the time, Persia was the name for 2500 years and in 1935 the name was changed to Iran ... Iran comes from Aryans.<sup>56</sup>

Dumas continues that many Iranians call themselves Persian and that “they don’t want to be associated with modern day Iran, because most of the news about modern day Iran is pretty bad.”<sup>57</sup> Dumas lists a series of implications regarding the differences between Iranians and Arabs, and the history of Iran, which enhance the audiences’ information.

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<sup>55</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>56</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>57</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

As with the languages practiced by Iranians and Americans, the interviewer asks Dumas if Iranians speak Persian, Arabic or a different language. She replies, “It’s a different language (which she means it’s Persian not Arabic). The alphabet is similar, except there’s five letters that are different. I can read Arabic, for instance, but I can’t understand it. But, it’s a totally different language.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, Dumas attempts to wash away a number of above-mentioned misunderstandings about the people of the region and their languages.

Considering the population of the Iranian diaspora in America, Dumas maintains that, “apparently in Los Angeles alone, there is half a million, and they say there are more Iranians in Los Angeles than there are anywhere else outside of Iran.”<sup>59</sup> Dumas also talked about how she started writing her first memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, and says that she had planned to write it for her children at the time. Her husband, as well as a couple of friends in the reading group she had joined in the Bay Area, California, found her stories very funny – despite the fact that she thought she had not intended to write funny stories – and encouraged her to have them published in a book. It was hard to get an agent who would publish Dumas’s stories because, first of all, September 11<sup>th</sup> happened when she had written the first 50 pages of *Funny in Farsi*, which made it difficult for Middle Easterners to get published, and, second, Dumas’s stories were all funny. In fact, when the first agent “promptly rejected” her work, she told Dumas that, “In America, when

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<sup>58</sup> Youtube (see footnote 43).

<sup>59</sup> One should also note that this interview was done in 2004. Therefore, one should consider the 12-year difference now, when calculating the current population of Iranians in America. Youtube (see footnote 43).

people read about the Middle East, they wanna read about the oppression and the struggle... I'm not getting that in your stories."<sup>60</sup> Dumas replied,

That's right because that's not my story. That would be my mother's story... I told her not every Middle Eastern is oppressed, and not every Middle Eastern man oppresses. So, her reason for rejecting me really bothered me. I think if she'd just said, 'you're not a good writer I've made,' I would have just quit.<sup>61</sup>

Dumas's statement above is very illuminating regarding the common belief amongst the publishers and agents in America and regarding the stereotypical image of the Middle Easterners who are portrayed in the Western literature. In other words, Dumas's speech uncovers the depth of misunderstanding about Middle Easterners even amongst the educated class in America, who expect to hear the narratives that represent the region the way suited to the publishing houses and common beliefs. In fact, the agents and publishers are guilty of spreading the stereotypes by screening and sanctioning a narrowed slice of materials in the media and scripts across the American nation. Dumas's views above are fraught with various levels of meaning that can be attained by the readers both directly and indirectly. Given the direct communication, one may surmise that Dumas's words signify that, first of all, it was difficult for her to be published in America because not everyone would tend to publish the stories written by a Middle Easterner, especially following the events of 9/11. Second, the agents expected to see upsetting and sad news about the Middle East, which is a common belief among the public. However, if read beyond the lines and surface meanings, concepts such as stereotyping, generalization, essentialization, and discrimination appear in the unsaid meaning or ironic inferences. Thus, one should read each sentence in the texts, pause,

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxPRTVvSFDY> (accessed on June 30, 2016).

<sup>61</sup> Youtube (see footnote 61).

think, and look for the ironic communications through the texts, contexts, as well as through the exchange of different interpretations. Briefly, it is in comparing and contrasting different levels of meanings that the reader can arrive at ironic meanings. To give the depth and length of attempt Dumas went through to get her first memoir published, she explains to the interviewer that her book was rejected for a number of times by different agents. Dumas says that she made “15 copies of [her] first 70 pages and always had a copy, everywhere [she] went.”<sup>62</sup> She finally found an agent who took an interest in her work and published *Funny in Farsi*.

Dumas says that her books suits “all ages ... and it is for adults... it’s a family book.” The interviewer then says that *Funny in Farsi* “reminded [him of the movie] My Big Fat Wedding,” to which Dumas answers, everyone told her the same, as well. Although different in genre, one can see the fine lines between the two productions, which delve into cultural representations of two distinct people living in America. This comparison also highlights the fact that Dumas’s memoir and the movie are both produced for the American audiences who might learn about the challenges facing, for example, Persians and Greeks, through the language of humor. Hence, pleasure and learning occur at the same time. Dumas says that she has travelled across America and has met “Indian, Iranian, German, and Indonesian”<sup>63</sup> families who have lived in America for several generations. These immigrant families find Dumas’s memoir the story of their lives, too. What strikes Dumas is the “commonalities” that exist among various ethnic groups in America. As she says, “We as humans have way more commonalities than

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<sup>62</sup> Youtube (see footnote 61).

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOAZarvc6w> (accessed on July 1, 2016).

we've differences."<sup>64</sup> Hence, Dumas's texts do not address a single ethnic group of immigrants in America, but they are the stories of all immigrants in America.

Another significant point that Dumas raises in the interview revolves around the nature of democracy in Iran and America. Asked by the interviewer to read some pages of her book, Dumas reads an excerpt in *Funny in Farsi*, the chapter entitled "I-raynians Need Not Apply," in which she talks about how hard it was to get a job after the Iranian Revolution. She begins reading from page 118 where she tells the story of her participation in presidential election in America when she was going to college at the time. She expresses her views regarding democracy and freedom of speech in America, and encourages the audiences to go out and vote for their candidates because the future of America depends on such democratic opportunities. Thus, through her writing, Dumas also sets out to delve into very serious political discussions from the point of view of an immigrant. It is safe, then, to argue that Dumas's memoirs promote ideas which are consistent with those, such as freedom of expression and thought, in American society.

Dumas maintains that the problems in the Middle East are due to the political leaders, who "do not listen to people."<sup>65</sup> Dumas's comments on the Middle East cannot necessarily be restricted to the region because one may also argue that Middle Eastern leaders are not the only people who are pushing the region toward destruction, but there are also American leaders who are responsible for the status quo.

## 2. The 2008 Talk in San Jose<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Youtube (see footnote 64).

<sup>65</sup> Youtube (see footnote 64).

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbRryxJ\\_vu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbRryxJ_vu8) (accessed on July 25, 2016).

In 2008, Dumas was invited by Commonwealth Club of California to talk about her memoirs. At the beginning of the talk, she was asked about the challenges facing her while publishing *Funny in Farsi*. She explained that the media publish “frightening”<sup>67</sup> news coming out of the Middle East, and because her text is steeped in humor, it was hard to get the book published in the first place. As she says, people think that because “I am an Iranian woman ... my writing should automatically be about politics, be automatically about Islam. And I still get this. It is harder to make people laugh than it is to make them cry.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, as Dumas had previously mentioned in the 2004 talk, which I included above, people in America expect to read the materials that depict violence in the Middle East, and it is as such the media that promote this type of imaginary regarding the region. Additionally, Dumas considers the role of editors very essential. She continues,

Even though we have free press in this country, ... what it comes down to is there is an editor, you know, at the top of every newspaper, who decides what stories are actually printed. And, over and over again, I see that the stories that have to do with Iran tend to be frightening. And, I find that so upsetting because, you know, there are people in this country seriously talking about invading Iran. Well, if that’s going to happen, then I think at least Americans read everything that can about Iran.<sup>69</sup>

An editor is then a cog in the machinery of censorship and screening, which allows certain subject to be released to the public. In light of the ironic communication in the talk, then, Dumas’s memoirs do not vigorously present politics, at least the way American media outlets do, but the texts attempt to furnish an attitude towards Iran and Iranian culture that stands oppositional to that presented in the media. As Dumas later

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<sup>67</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).

<sup>68</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).

<sup>69</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).



adds, she has done many book tours across America and she is “surprised” to find out how “receptive” Americans in some of these rural areas were to “learn about Iran.”<sup>70</sup> She finds audiences in smaller areas very “curious,” which is contrary to the “image” that “smaller towns” are “close-minded.”<sup>71</sup> Considering the curiosity amongst Americans in learning about other ethnicities, especially Iranians, Dumas also mentions that,

In every town that I go to, there are a few people who are absolutely determined to make their citizens understand the concept of shared humanity. And, they are usually the ones who invite me, and organize everything, and organize the Persian meal from the recipes they have downloaded from the Internet (audiences laugh), so it’s a ...um (Dumas clears her throat) ... it ... it is quite charming.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, Dumas insinuates that raising public awareness regarding other ethnic minorities is an important step Americans need to seriously consider. Her book tours and talks, then, specifically serve as a means to partly contribute to raising Americans’ consciousness about Iranians. Similar to Americans, Dumas finds her books also being read in Australia, for example, “Tasmania,”<sup>73</sup> as she says. The case of Tasmania indicates that Dumas’s memoirs, which incorporate humor and cultural representation of Iranians in the texts, are not restricted to America only, but that her project is reaching far beyond the local territories she had initially aimed.

### 3. The 2008 Talk in San Francisco<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).

<sup>71</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).

<sup>72</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).

<sup>73</sup> Youtube (see footnote 67).

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkfRm6uPrpg> (accessed on July 8, 2016).

Similar to the previous talks in which Dumas delved into the role of American media, in this talk, as well, she dwells upon the same subject, yet this time she provides the audience with more details and clearer images of how Muslims are portrayed in the media. Accordingly, several layers of meaning appear while interpreting the talk. Dumas points out that,

In America the way Muslims are depicted, every time there is a Muslim on T.V., it's always somebody who looks like he's never laughed out loud in his life. And, you know, I'm a typical secular hockey mum (the audience laughs), and you never see me on T.V." in a way that "whenever there is a Muslim on T.V., I look at that person, and I think, 'I would not want that person to be my next-door neighbor' (the audience laugh mildly).<sup>75</sup>

As to the unsaid communication in the paragraph above, the media in America is powerful enough in affecting the public opinion, so much so that even Dumas herself is not an exception. Second, the American viewers get to watch what the media favor, and for this reason, there is never a "secular" Muslim on Television who may change the views of the audiences about Islam and Muslims. A laughing Muslim man, for example, is one of those images the American media outlets do not want the public to see. Dumas's statement above reminds us of Chomsky's contention over the impact of corporate media in America and their role in democracy. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky argues that the media broadcasts the type of image the elite and the powerful who own the media imagine, and that the alleged truth is constructed in the discourse of the media:

The democratic postulate is that the media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived. Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria, and they have

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<sup>75</sup> Youtube (see footnote 75).

support for this contention in the intellectual community. If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to ‘manage’ public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at odds with reality. (IX)

Hence, one can question the credibility of the truth and images published in American media. In addition, Foucault’s concept of truth, as well as the way the alleged truth becomes acceptable through the power relations also come to one’s mind. “Truth,” as Foucault argues, is constituted “by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it” (1976, 114). Dumas’s discussion of the media coverage in America and the promulgation of the imaginary and truth as desired by the media are in keeping with Chomsky’s and Foucault’s contentions above. Foucault, meanwhile, casts doubts on universal truths, positing “maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are (Rabinow 74-75), and thus he encourages oppositional politics. Dumas’s writing and her talks also serve as oppositional politics in a way that they critique the positional superiority of hegemonic discourses in the media and direct the attention of the readers and audiences to “the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth” (75). In regards to the problem of representation and truth, Dumas maintains that,

And, I think, it’s interesting ... I’ve been travelling the country for five and a half years, giving speeches. I give keynotes. I speak in colleges, and I have never had national press. And, every time, someone says ... ‘why is it that the news doesn’t cover what you do?’ and the truth is what I do is considered ‘soft news’ (she makes an air quotes).<sup>76</sup>

By way of casting suspicion on the discourse of the corporate media, then, Dumas also admits that her talks have never had the chance of being broadcast on “national press,”

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<sup>76</sup> Youtube (see footnote 75).

indicating that the owners of the national media intend to sustain their version of truth or narrative within their media.

After Dumas spells out the phrase “soft news,” the host interrupts her and comments, “It’s not interesting from the point of view of the sort of violence,”<sup>77</sup> to which Dumas concedes, “it’s not scary. I think, that’s the problem. And, shared humanity is considered soft news, but if I were ... if I’d written a book about hating a group of people, I guarantee you would’ve seen me by now on Television.”<sup>78</sup> Hence, the oppositional voices that complicate the hegemonic voices, or as Bakhtin uses the terms “centrifugal forces” versus “centripetal forces,”<sup>79</sup> hardly get the chance of being represented and, as such, are suppressed. However, Dumas articulates her views in her writing and in the talks. Therefore, if not shown on “national press,” she at least makes every effort to challenge the hegemonic voices through writing and giving speech. As Foucault acknowledges,

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions which appear to be neutral and independent; to criticize in such a matter that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them, will be unmasked, so that one can fight them. (6)

To challenge “the political violence” that appears in the discourse of American media, Dumas explains to the audience the workings of American media, such as CNN. Dumas says, “[...] a few years ago, when my *Funny in Farsi*, my first book, was a finalist for Thurber Prize for American Humor, I was scheduled to be on CNN,”<sup>80</sup> but she was

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<sup>77</sup> Youtube (see footnote 75).

<sup>78</sup> Youtube (see footnote 75).

<sup>79</sup> In *Discourse in the Novel* (1981), Bakhtin stratifies voices within the text. Thus, forces may move toward a single “verbal-ideological world,” referred to as “centripetal,” and forces that may gravitate toward “decentralization and disunification,” described as “centrifugal” (263).

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkFRm6uPrrg> (accessed on July 8, 2016).

invited to give a talk about “a female suicide bomber,”<sup>81</sup> instead. As Dumas repeats in the talk, the subjects about the Middle East should be “frightening”<sup>82</sup> to appeal to both American media and audiences. To demonstrate her point of view regarding the impact of the media on the public opinion, Dumas goes on to state that,

I remember whenever my American friends would come over to my house when I was growing up, they were always surprised at, like, how funny my father was. They never expected that. I mean, like, a Muslim man (addressing the audience, Dumas asks) ‘What do you guys think of a Muslim man?’ ‘You know, not humorous’ (she answers). And, when I grew up, I realized that people have this very incorrect image ... very narrow.<sup>83</sup>

From the paragraph above, one can identify the applicability of the media in changing the views of Americans. A “funny” Muslim man may surprise ordinary Americans because they are disciplined by the media to believe that Muslim men essentially exercise violence and are never “funny.” Kazem, Dumas’s father, is one of the main characters in the memoirs that shape the plots and enhance the degree of humor in the texts. In other words, a Muslim man such as Kazem complicates the stereotypical image of the Middle Eastern man.<sup>84</sup> The same case also applies for Dumas and her mother who are not oppressed Middle Eastern women, the image of which resists that propped up in the media.

#### **4. The 2010 Talk at Florida International University<sup>85</sup>**

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<sup>81</sup> Youtube (see footnote 81).

<sup>82</sup> Youtube (see footnote 81).

<sup>83</sup> Youtube (see footnote 81).

<sup>84</sup> In a public talk at University of Delaware, Maz Jobarni also goes through the stereotypes in the Western media regarding a Muslim man, who is never showing laughing on T.V. please, refer to the link below for further analysis; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etHQxlp84lg> (accessed on December 2015).

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGcek5yssNA> (accessed on July 15, 2016)

The talk I have incorporated in my thesis may be one of the talks Dumas has delivered in academia. Nevertheless, what matters is that Dumas was given the chance to present at a university where she not only talks about her memoirs, but also dwells upon the subjects of Iran and the cultural aspects of the country she finds appealing to the audience. One needs to distinguish this talk, though, from other ones in public places and halls Dumas has already given: Diasporic writing in the form of autobiography makes its way into an academic place, not to mention that fact that the writer of the memoir is a Middle Eastern woman whose oeuvre is replete with humor. These specificities make Dumas's works stand as the site where a number of research-worthy subjects converge, including the gender implications, that is, the position of Iranian women in Iran and America, Iranian and American cultural values, migrancy, diaspora, hybridity, political views, and so on.

Giving a short account of the common reading program at FIU, Douglas L. Robertson, Dean of Undergraduate Education, introduces Firoozeh Dumas and her memoirs—*Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without an Accent*. The former, however, has already been read by the members of the reading program, as Robertson points out. Then, Robertson reads a passage about Firoozeh Dumas' life that reveals how important the role of Firoozeh's father was in shaping her writing career, as he always told her "colorful stories."<sup>86</sup> It may come as a surprise to the audience that "In 2001, with no prior writing experience, Firoozeh decides to write her stories as a gift to her two children,

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<sup>86</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

which became the book (*Funny in Farsi*),<sup>87</sup> as Robertson says. Robertson names a number of Dumas's achievements, being

*Funny in Farsi* was on San Francisco Chronicle and Los Angeles Times bestseller list, and was a finalist for PEN USA Award in 2004 ... That's a big deal (Robertson proclaims) and a finalist in 2005 for an audio award for the best audio book, where she lost out to Bob Dylan ... I just wish I could lose out to Bob Dylan ... eh ... I will be honored (Robertson comments). She was also a finalist for prestigious Thurber Prize ... that's a really big deal (Robertson acknowledges to the audience) ... eh ... for American Humor, and she lost to Jon Stewart at the Daily Show (the audience members praise Dumas by applauding her. Meanwhile, Robertson looks at Dumas sitting on the stage and smiles at her).<sup>88</sup>

Dumas begins her talk with the subject of Iran and its geographic location, which were a dilemma for many Americans she met before the Iranian Revolution. She says, Americans at the time wondered where Iran was located. She and her mother answered,

It's right between Iraq and Afghanistan. And, they said, 'Where is that?' (the audience members laugh mildly), and then we'd say 'O.K., you know where Caspian Sea is, where that famous caviar comes from?' We are to the South. And, they said, 'What's caviar?' And, then I'll tell you that fish egg conversation is always a dead-end. So, it just got to the point where we said, 'You know where Russia and Japan are?' We are in the neighborhood (Dumas makes a funny gesture, which makes the audiences laugh again mildly).<sup>89</sup>

The implied message Dumas embeds in the paragraph above is more than just the ignorance of Americans about geography, but it is an indication of the extent to which a nation such as Iran is barely known to Americans. By comparison, America is a nation completely known to the world over. Dumas implicitly compares the positional inferiority and the marginal status of a nation such as Iran to the positional superiority and central status of America. However, Dumas also critiques Iranians' knowledge of their own history by maintaining that her family did not know what Persian cats were

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<sup>87</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

<sup>88</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

<sup>89</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

until one of their American neighbors brought Dumas's family a book in which they could see pictures of Persian cats. They found out that Americans are more familiar to Persian cats than Iranians, and from then onward, they introduced themselves as "We are from Iran, where Persian cats come from" (the audiences laugh mildly).<sup>90</sup> Hence, Dumas directs her critique not only at Americans, but also at Iranians, and by doing so, she indirectly highlights that there should be more understanding about different ethnicities in America because insufficient knowledge about a certain ethnic group in America may lead to serious consequences, such as racism and discrimination, as she describes in her memoirs. Dumas, then, goes on to delve into her experience at the summer camp, which she also includes in her *Funny in Farsi* in a chapter entitled A Dozen Key Chains. By unravelling the details of her experience both in the memoir and in this talk, Dumas looks at the distinct cultural practices between Iran and America. In this chapter, Dumas explains that she "did not bathe for two weeks"<sup>91</sup> at the camp because the bathrooms were not equipped with individual rooms, where everyone could bathe separately, but they "had a row of shower heads instead."<sup>92</sup> When Dumas realized the difference, she asked herself, "Am I the only one noticing that the shower walls and doors are missing?"<sup>93</sup> Thus, being shy to show her body to the rest of the girls, she refused to bathe. In other words, coming from the culture that differs dramatically from that of America, Dumas alludes to the troubles facing immigrants and, at the same time, latently brings up the issue of cultural differences that lies in the binary of home and host. One

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<sup>90</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

<sup>91</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

<sup>92</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).

<sup>93</sup> Youtube (see footnote 86).



can, then, read subjects such as immigration and diaspora into Dumas's speech, and accordingly, see the portrait of young Dumas becoming familiar to the host culture.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has carried out an investigation of Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas's humorous memoirs with respect to the ironic meanings and heteroglossia in the texts and contexts. To apply Hutcheon's and Bakhtin's guiding principles, I have included the competing views of a number of critics based inside and outside of Iran and altering levels of meaning that can arise from the texts. Dumas's talks, as well, illuminate the social, historical, political circumstances and her purpose of writing the memoirs. Therefore, when reading the texts, one can use Dumas's viewpoints, the texts, contexts, and further readings in order to identify the unstated meanings. What can be known about most of the Iranian readers is that *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without an Accent* have been mostly appreciated for the expression of the author's intimate affinity to her native, cultural identity, and her depiction of cultural differences and human relations through the medium of humorous texts. Moreover, Dumas's works have been admired for the representation of a neutral stance in regards to politics and religion. However, scarce attention has been paid to the way the books employ humor to reach out to humanity or the way humor masks the ugly face of daily run-ins in a migrant's life. To be precise, none of the Iranian critics effectively discussed literary tropes, such as irony and metaphor, and rhetorical techniques, such as satire and sarcasm elements that the texts weave into their narrative structures.

In regards to irony, Dumas's texts have benefitted from the ludic function of irony, which assumes a light-hearted and mild teasing role. This function holds a combination

of humor and wit in stock. I surmise that those, such as Mobarezin, that have delivered an acrimonious critique have been confused as to whether the text performs an assailing or a ludic function. This does not mean that they have been specifically aware of the functions of irony, but that they have been baffled what type of humor Dumas has enmeshed in her works. Moreover, since this last function employs pun and metaphor, it is accused of having an undertone that is non-committal and distanced, which is exactly what Dumas has been accused of. That some portions of Dumas's text have appealed to the Iranian audiences while some have stirred anger among them perfectly reflect upon the cultural values and power relations in Iran. The former is concerned with the network of human relations, while the latter is linked to the state-beamed discourse that applies restrictive measures to Dumas's works.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, the relational and inclusive aspects of irony can encourage the readers to consider the network of relations among meanings, texts, and people all at the same time without having to leave out any specific level of meaning. In simpler terms, besides the interaction that exists among text, context, and the reader/interpreter, there is an interplay of meanings at work that springs from the relation between one level of meaning and another. One or two interpreters may arrive at two or three meanings from the same text they are reading and all obtained meanings can be valid.

In the case of humor, Dumas's oeuvres put forward some functions of humour that can be summarized as follows: Humor can temper difficult moments presented in the memoirs and, thus, make the conflicts intelligible to the American readership. That is

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<sup>94</sup> I have discussed this earlier in the section entitled Copyright Laws, Translation, and Censorship.

why the texts capture the past to bring biases and racism of the day up to the surface.

Ulrike Erichsen affirms this notion:

Humour can be used as a means to defuse such cultural conflicts by offering a strictly limited context for such conflict ... In such cases, humor can have a socially regulatory function, providing an outlet for criticism without aggravating the initial conflict. (30)

Another function of humour in the memoirs is concerned with the position of the texts in connecting two distinct spheres. That is, the texts occupy an in-between space between Iranian nationalist ideals, on the one hand, and American animosity towards Iranians, on the other. Accordingly, the narrative benefits from a technique that ironically responds to Bush's representation of Muslims and Middle Easterners as the "Axis of Evil."

Therefore, it is rather the way the texts cache ironic and witty remarks and the way they aim to evoke responses that should matter to the readers and scholars.

One last word about humor is that Dumas extensively uses self-deprecating as a technique or tool in her memoirs. Humorists such as Dumas depict their characters from their own community in such a way that they are humiliated and mocked. While self-deprecating humorists have been accused of humiliating their own communities, and celebrating and perpetuating the stereotypes associated to their communities, I discuss that Dumas has tried to turn the negativity, which is attributed not only to Iranians but also to Muslims and Middle Easterners, into a positive light. In other words, Dumas' humor can serve as a mechanical defense in a way that she tells jokes about her own ethnic community in order to drive aggression away from the dominant status of American society. I would like to relate the psychological mechanical defence of humor to what Erichsen argued, and I quoted above, as humor having "a socially regulatory

function” (30). These two functions may be similar when applied in Dumas’s self-deprecating of her immediate family and friends, both American and Iranian, in order to strike a balance between the mainstream citizenry and the marginalized and/or minorities. Hence, contexts and situations in which self-deprecation occurs are worth noting: All the gaffes and blunders Dumas’s parents and relatives make in the chapters can directly be linked to self-deprecating and self-criticism, which can also be related to the ludic function of irony. It is, though, the way critics distinguish between the ludic and assailing, and the way they look at Dumas’s humor in different contexts that can render mild or harsh critiques. What is certain is that beyond the surface meanings, there is a slew of unnoticed and unsaid meanings that need to be uncovered by a cautious reader.

**CHAPTER TWO: Reading the Carnavalesque and Parody in Maz Jobrani's *Axis of Evil* (2005-7)**

Hall, Keeter and Williamson (1993) state that humour is an important element in bringing our social world into light, and that it is found in all societies. Even in ancient Greece, humour served an important role in sustaining democracy (Jenkins 1984). During that era, when Old Comedy was a common pastime, the theater was the venue in which “problems were debated, corruption was uncovered, and injustices were corrected” (10). Jenkins goes on to describe the use of humour in dissecting cultural standards and political establishments by arguing that,

Aristophanic comedy was a complex mechanism through which the public was exposed to a model of problem-solving similar to the one they were expected to follow in Athenian democracy. Questions were debated and dissected and decided upon in the context of high comic art. (10)

During the Middle Ages, the court jokers represented the voices of ordinary citizens by mocking authorities and exposing the bitter realities others could not openly discuss (Pollio, 1996). Mintz (1985) notes that clowns and comedians regularly assumed the role of social critics in their performances: “Shakespeare made extensive use of the fool’s traditional license to have the innocent but sharp, shrewd observer speak the ‘truth’ which was universally recognized but politically taboo” (76). Jenkins acknowledges that American humorists can be social commentators and critics of the states: “By comically questioning government policies and satirically attacking political leaders American clowns demonstrated that even the humblest of citizens was capable of analyzing public problems, debating controversial issues, and making decisions for themselves” (2). Other scholars such as Combs and Nimmo (1996) state that “making fun of mistakes called

attention to them in order to seek a corrective” in the past (6). What comes as the ultimate result from the constellation of perspectives and figures of speech is that affairs will be viewed from a new perspective. Jobrani’s stand-up comedy shows convey their messages by incorporating critical views into a comic context without having them considered taboo.

### **I. The Post-9/11 Environment and the Emergence of the Axis**

9/11 served as a turning point in the re-definition and re-invention of American nationality, identity, and the practices of exclusionary nationalist discourses. The binary of “us” and “them” as a result of the terrorist attacks gained momentum not only on rhetorical grounds, but also in political and military fronts. As a result, a slew of solid debates over identity in the United States as a country, which accommodates a medley of races and ethnic groups, has emerged. Muslims were the main target of such investigations and their membership in religious groups underwent heavy scrutiny. The U.S. government’s immigration policies essentially targeted Arab and Muslim Americans, Iranian Americans, Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, “drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion that articulate a desired composition – imagined if not necessarily realized – of the nation” (Ngai, 2004; 5). This means that immigrants and their children occupy a space outside the imagined notion of an American identity, thus marginalized.

Racialized discourses, as such, were easily constructed in accordance with the appearance of a Muslim. Being aware of such racialized boundaries, Muslim writers have tried to address a set of critical issues such as identity, religion, gender, class, culture, and ethnic diversity in their narratives. Arab writers like Leila Abouela, Mohja Kahf, Fiza

Guene, Laila Halaby, and Iranian writers such as Azadeh Moaveni, Marjane Satrapi, Farnoosh Moshiri are only very few examples that exhibit a network of relationships in their works that grapple with the cultural identity of Middle Easterners.

There are a number of stand-up comedies that came around after the 9/11 tragic events, such as the *Secret Policeman's Balls* (2001 to date), the *New York Arab-American Comedy Festival* (2003 to date); the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* (2005 to date), and finally, the annual *Stand Up for Freedom* that is held at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2007, 2008, and 2009); however, among these shows, I will mainly focus on the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* in which an Iranian-American comedy figure, Maz Jobrani, has been passionately acting since its inauguration.

The *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* took off in November 2005, assuming its title in an ironic gesture from George W. Bush's account of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as three nations comprising an 'Axis of Evil' (State of the Union on January 29, 2002). This was a project aimed at subverting and yet exploring the common clichés and stereotypes that came out of the context of war on terror. The tour was composed of Dean Obeidallah and Aron Kader (two Palestinian-Americans), Ahmed Ahmed (an Egyptian-American) and Maz Jobrani (an Iranian-American) who travelled to 15 cities in America. The tour gained more fame on March 10, 2007 after they owned their Comedy Central Special and featured in high-profile media outlets such as CNN and *Newsweek*, as well as NPR and *Time Magazine* which published a number of their media interviews. The group toured a number of Arab countries in the Middle East such as Amman, Egypt, The UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon, etc. adopting the title *Showtime Arabia* for their tour. This also earned them more fame among Arab and Persian nations.

The *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* embodies a type of folk humor that is reconstructed in a variety of sites, thus comprising its own public sphere in which conflicting voices challenge each other. In such a space, established and overriding discourses published through the channels of power are negotiated, defied, probed into, and unsettled in a carnivalesque performativity. There is no specified discursive modality to it, inasmuch as there is no designated site of speech. This property allows *Axis* to run parallel to a number of expressive modes that occur in filmic productions, recorded and live performances, TV or radio interviews, printed interviews, the Internet, and documentaries.

## II. The *Axis*, the Carnavalesque, and Parody

In a number of interviews,<sup>95</sup> Jobrani states that his shows highly depend on the ongoing debates in America, especially those in American media, that promote stereotypes and discrimination on social and political levels. As a powerful tool, then, humor functions as a double-edged sword that produces both positive and negative impacts. Maz Jobrani assumes the role of comedians, intermediating between their minority culture and the recipient society.

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque does not slide under a definitive or unitary taxonomy or genre, but it rather entails several genres that collectively construct a new whole whose ingredients are “letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies on the high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations... various authorial masks” (108).

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<sup>95</sup> In a set of interviews inside and outside America, mostly in English language, Jobrani explains the sources of topics he draws upon in his shows. I have included many of these interviews in this chapter.



As to its genre, the carnival negates any formerly specified genres in a way that it forms its own genre that subscribes to a variety of forms, such as “multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, [and] serious and comic” (108). Having said that, Bakhtin puts forth the core of his argument about the carnival by stating that it

is a pageant without footlights and without division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life*. (122)

I suggest that Jobrani’s *Axis* carries with it critical components of the carnival as the *Axis* does not follow a certain paradigm in terms of theatrical framework and also does not distance itself from the audiences. That is, audiences participate in Jobrani’s performance, in the sense that they also cast comments during Jobrani’s performance on the stage. Jobrani takes advantage of the audiences’ sporadic comments and turns them into a new set of materials for his performance. Thus, the performer and the spectators participate in the show together and at the same time.

In addition, the carnival is not consistent with any aspect of ordinary life in the sense that it does not abide by any “laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life” (122). In other words, the carnival aims to suspend “hierarchical structure and all forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it, that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)” (123). Jobrani’s light-hearted humor and sarcastic tone, which I will discuss later, attacks a variety of social and political figures. The *Axis* helps the marginal and oppressed segments of American society emerge and live alongside the mainstream and dominant class so much so that we often find the latter being mocked and jeered at by the former. The fact that

Jobrani talks about African-Americans, Latin Americans, Middle Easterners, and Muslims alongside the atrocities committed on myriad ethnic groups echoes his intention in bringing to the foreground the neglected layers of society.

Bakhtin does not see any finite point to the constellation of signs in utterances, and views the words as the key locus of vehement ideological struggles (Gardiner 36). As Gardiner maintains, there are a number of linguistic techniques such as “double-voicedness,” “multi-accentedness” and “indirect speech” Bakhtin mentions in order to enunciate the basic idea that utterances are fundamentally “impure” or hybridized constructions, complex amalgams of different points of view, residues of past uses and anticipations of future responses, diverse idiomatic expressions and the like (37). They always evince a multiplicity of actual and potential meanings.

The paragraph above argues about the grammatical fixities and rhetorical conventions that are openly violated in the carnival. That is, the assumed relation between signifier and signified, sign and referent, and word and meaning is conveniently unsettled through linguistic and performative liberty. What is specific about stand-up comedies, however, is a propensity for dialogue in the public sphere referred to as ‘ethics of personalism’, that hinges upon the assertion ‘of the value of otherness in the context of sociality’ (32). Stand-up comedies, in this respect, are not reduced to higher strata of society, but they are the resort of a wide spectrum of population coming from lower to higher tiers of society, with each bringing its own certain socio-cultural values, interests, chains of episteme, and linguistic styles to public sphere. By giving humorous examples and distorted gesticulations and accents, Jobrani parallels his stand-up with many characteristics in Bakhtin’s carnival.

With respect to the title of Jobrani's comedy, *Axis of Evil*, the sort of meaning produced goes against Bush's statement (George W. Bush's account of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as three nations comprising an 'Axis of Evil' in State of the Union on January 29, 2002). This means that Jobrani's stand-up comedy parodies the original by introducing a signification that is opposed to that of Bush's. Therefore, by targeting the political agenda installed by the Bush administration, Jobrani is able to give his work a subversive, polyphonic, and dialogic property that is part and parcel of a process called "destructive genesis" (Kristeva 47). In *A Theory of Parody* (1985), Hutcheon defines parody as "[...] a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (6). Hutcheon's definition of parody heavily rests upon irony: "Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference" (32).

Hutcheon argues that both parody and satire employ irony, but also that it is the pragmatic and semantic levels of irony that enable the parodic text to transcend the mere purpose of ridicule. While irony on the semantic level distinguishes between meanings, that is, one signifier and two or more signifieds, on the pragmatic level irony ties itself to a ridiculing effect. Thus, there is a negation of univocality and unitextuality on semantic and structural levels (54). It is also important to note that parody retains the past and yet evaluates it in an attempt to present a prospective intellectual trajectory. In connection to Jobrani's humor, parody as employed in *Axis* not only entertains the audiences and renders several levels of signification possible all at the same time, but it also encourages the audiences to look to the future and adopt a new perspective towards the original text, source, and discourse.

In terms of the past and the contents of parody, Hutcheon discusses that “Parody historicizes by placing art within the history of art; its inclusion of the entire enunciative act and its paradoxical authorized transgression of norms allow for certain ideological considerations. Its interaction with satire overtly makes room for added social dimensions” (109-110). Arguably one can put forth that Jobrani’s stand-up comedy repeats stereotypes and discrimination in a humorous undertone, albeit inverted. This is the paradox of parody that Jobrani has also announced in his shows that he himself has been guilty of stereotyping.<sup>96</sup>

Moreover, as the *Axis* delves into politics, social norms, religious and ritual practices, cultural values, and ethnicity, I suggest that *Axis* should be read according to various intertextual sources that form the materials for Jobrani’s shows. Yet, how can humor be applied to serious topics? In other words, how can humor aim to subvert authoritative hierarchies? As laughter and comedy are incorporated in the carnivalesque in Jobrani’s text, I first investigate what sites laughter and comedy occupy.

When members of the audience know that they are to see a comic scene or hear a joke or read a funny story, they expect to face an utterance or discourse that bears a funny undertone or an action that carries such a cue. Therefore, both utterances and circumstances contribute to the funniness of something. Stand-up comedians usually provide their audiences with cues, such as “Have you heard the one about ...” or similar

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<sup>96</sup> In a talk show sponsored by TED Talks, Jobrani mentions the downsides of his profession, and the problems he has dealt with in his comedy. To see the event, please refer to the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmXiltk49Gw> August 19, 2010 (accessed on November 15, 2015).

catch phrases like “I was at the bar/mall when I realized that ...” and as such prepare the audiences for the coming of a joke. Correspondingly, it is the facial expressions, gestures, and motions that embody and reinforce the formal properties of stand-up comedies.

Neale and Krutnik distinguish between two marked features of the stand-up performances;

The first is the use of direct and personalized address, the cultivation of an air of genial familiarity enabling the performer to address guests, contestants, and performers alike with professional ease... [such as] Bob Hope ... in hosting events like the Oscar ceremonies ... The other main feature of the stand-up style – the use of rapid, one-off jokes shorn of any elaborate or elaborated context – is also highly-suited to the role of host or compere. Jokes of this kind can be quickly inserted into the flow of an introductory discourse, or a session of questions and answers, without interrupting their progress or disturbing their primary purpose to any great extent. (185)

The second style is suited to the contemporary performance of stand-up comedy, which relates to my discussion. Maz Jobrani, like other contemporary stand-up comedians, uses an off-the-cuff style of monologue, yet there is no “session of questions and answers,” as mentioned above. Like court jesters who ridiculed authorities and brought comic relief from everyday stressors inherent to the throne during the medieval period (Tafuya, 2009), today’s comedians such as Jon Stewart assume this role and “play the fool by using the words of those in power against them, revealing ‘truth’ by a simple reformulation of their statements” (Jones 113).

### **III. Sifting through the Social Circumstances**

As the impact of 9/11 divided the American citizenry into us and them, many Muslim communities that had perceived themselves to be a fundamental part of American society until then began to feel alienated. One significant aspect of stereotypes

is that they are formed on the basis of fear that leads to destruction and division. As Mezirow argues,

Our culture conspires against collaborative thinking and the development of social competence by conditioning us to think adversarially in terms of winning or losing ... We tend to believe that there are two sides to every issue and only two. We set out to win an argument rather than to understand different ways of thinking and different frames of reference, and to search for common ground, to resolve differences, and to get things done. (12)

In the meantime, ethnic and religious stereotypes about Muslims calcify the status of Muslim as an imminent threat to the rest of main citizenry. Muslims became as much an object of scrutiny as they became a relegated religious group across the entire corpus of American society.

Highly securitized places such as airports have always been of interest to humorists and stand-up comedians as these spaces are administered by the governments and therefore one can discern to what extent Muslims and Middle Easterners are looked upon with distrust and suspicion. In fact, airports were the sites where all the suspicion about Muslims was objectified so much so that racial, ethnic and religious profiling found new meanings in the wake of 9/11. Maz Jobrani quips his immeasurable anxiety while passing through security as “If anything beeps in the metal detector, I think, ‘Dammit, I’m a terrorist! I knew it!’”<sup>97</sup> Ahmed Ahmed acknowledges that he does not fly on the day of his show because in one of his flights “The stress reached a level that the whiskers in his beard started to fall out.”<sup>98</sup> He was then handcuffed by the Las Vegas airport security police in November 2004. When disappointed by what had happened to him, Ahmed was

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/01/us/nationalspecial3/01traveler.html?pagewanted=print> (accessed on October 25, 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Nytimes website (see footnote 98).

approached by an Afro-American officer who told him “Yo man, now you know what it was like to be a black man in the 60s.”<sup>99</sup> What comedy played out right after the tragedy of 9/11 is very significant as it called the attention to critical concepts such as ethnic otherness and association. Discussing the impact of 9/11, Leon Rappoport wrote:

There are good reasons to argue that 9/11 has had a fundamental impact on the general meaning of race and ethnicity. Traditional differences between most ethnic groups are fading because terrorist attacks make no such distinctions. All of us are in the same boat, equally and impartially threatened ... When any group of people, no matter how diverse, is facing a collective, life-threatening situation they invariably come together and set aside their differences ... The one exception has been Muslims and others with a Near Eastern background. (124-25)

In finding themselves distanced from the mainstream American citizenry, Muslims and affiliated ethnic groups were never indifferent, but felt obligated to stand up against all the negativity and misconstrued recognition spread in the US. Humor, as a result, was adopted as a vigorous, effective trope to unsettle suspicion, stereotyping, and wiretapping against Middle Easterners and Muslims.

It is the curiosity of the European and American marketplaces about Muslim communities that encouraged Muslim artists to produce their works. The initiative taken by these artists allowed them to occupy a space between the ethnic groups and main citizenry, and recruit comedians who themselves bring to their audiences the knowledge of both the minority and the majority. Thus, comedy serves as a lynchpin attaching both sides together while being aware that there is a marked distinction between the two.

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<sup>99</sup> Nytimes website (see footnote 98).

#### IV. The *Axis in Praxis*

Before I move on to Jobrani's stand-up, I briefly examine major elements of stand-up comedy. Arthur P. Dudden, affirms that "standup comedy's roots are ... entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences" (86). Contrary to other types of comedy, stand-up comedies "stress relative directness of artists/audience communication and the proportional importance of comic behavior and comic dialogue versus the development of plot and situation. Such a definition is hardly pure, but it is workable" (86). Dudden, then, goes on to describe twentieth century's stand-up comedy, which "has been the backbone of vaudeville, burlesque, the variety theater (for example, Earl Carroll's *Vanities*, the *Ziegfeld Follies*), as well as night-club and resort entertainment" (86). Admitting that "anthropologists and sociologists" alongside other scholars from "theater" and "humor" have not adequately analyzed socio-cultural functions of stand-up comedy, Dudden mentions the anthropologist Mary Douglas who presents a cogent argument about "public joking" (87). Douglas asserts that the "contents and processes of joke telling are at least as important as the texts of the jokes themselves," meaning "the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but ... can be identified in the total social situation" (87). I would like to rest my argument of stand-up comedy in part based on the above-statement, in the sense that Jobrani, too, places emphasis on socio-political and cultural affairs and beliefs in his re-examination of such concerns. By subverting the contents, Jobrani tears down and distorts conventional patterns of perception and expression. Using the main techniques in the carnivalesque, Jobrani mimics different ethnic accents, poses funny body gestures, and ridicules the follies of both authorities and ordinary ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the presence of heterogeneous voices in Jobrani's



stand-up comedy also shape a dialogic space which accommodates the conflicting ideas and ideologies; hence, it is heteroglossic. Yet, as the aim of this chapter is to echo critical implications in Jobrani's *Axis* in particular, I have selected the videos on YouTube that are confined to the relevant themes in the *Axis* instead of the whole corpus of Jobrani's stand-up performance.

## 1. Of Stereotypes and Misrepresentations

In a stand-up comedy sponsored by TEDx,<sup>100</sup> Maz Jobrani begins his show by touching on critical issues regarding the political conflicts between the U.S and Iran. From this point of departure, he sets out to grapple with identity politics as an inner conflict. He begins by saying the following:

Being Iranian-American creates its own set of problems... part of me likes me, part of me hates me (the audience laughs). Part of me thinks that I should have a nuclear program; the other part of me thinks that I can't be trusted with one (the audience laughs louder). These are dilemmas I have every day.<sup>101</sup>

Then, he goes on talking about the problems he has encountered in Arab countries for his birth place, Iran. Due to his birth place, he has been the object of scrutiny and suspicion in Arab country destinations. Jobrani's dealing with this matter is presented in a humorous tone, yet he unpacks the political tension that exists between Arab countries and Iran, which might not be known to his Western audiences well enough. Thus, he informs the audiences of the distrust that exists between Iran, on the one hand, and Americans and Arab countries, on the other. He makes a direct mention of Kuwait where he experienced one of these security-related issues. Jobrani states that at Kuwait airport

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<sup>100</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmXiltk49Gw> (accessed on November 3, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

he was asked about his deceased father's and grandfather's names, then he jokingly admits that he thought that the officer would tell him "we've been waiting for you for two hundred years (there is an explosion of laughter in the audience) ... Your grandfather has a parking violation. It's way overdue (the audience laughs loudly again). You owe us 2 billion dollars."<sup>102</sup> This is only one aspect of the Middle Eastern troubles an Iranian-American may get into, while Jobrani also tells more stories about his experience being an actor in Hollywood: He says that he was offered to play a "bad guy."<sup>103</sup> A casting director asked him to act as a terrorist in a film and say, "I will kill you in the name of Allah."<sup>104</sup> He continues, "I could say that, but what if I were to say 'hello I'm your doctor?'"<sup>105</sup> But then the director says, "They go great! And then you say 'I'm gonna hijack the hospital!'"<sup>106</sup> Jobrani also maintains that the director told him, "Your character would rob a bank with a bomb around him."<sup>107</sup> He kept wondering why he "wouldn't rob a bank with a gun"<sup>108</sup> instead of a bomb strapped around him? Or, "if I want the money, why would I kill myself?"<sup>109</sup>

One of the hilarious moments in this show happens when Jobrani depicts Muslims suspecting themselves, wondering if they are terrorists. To demonstrate this, he tells the audience about a number of the shows he performed in different states in America, where accidentally some terrorist attacks took place in the exact same states. Then, he thinks aloud and jokingly, "As a Middle Eastern male when you show up around a lot of these

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<sup>102</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>103</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>104</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>105</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>106</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>107</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>108</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>109</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

*activities*, you start feeling guilty at one point. I was watching the news. Am I involved in this crap? I didn't get the memo! What's going on?"<sup>110</sup> (Stress is mine)

Jobrani's attempt in portraying Middle Easterners and Muslims in a positive light does not work in one direction by always complimenting Muslims, but he goes further by acknowledging that there are some Muslims who are terrorists. In this show, for instance, he talks about a failed car bombing that occurred in Time Square. He asks why a terrorist organization would ever take credit for a failed attack, and then he twists his accent like the Pakistani Taliban who did this crime and continues, "We just want to say we tried (Pause) (The audience laughs loud). And, furthermore, it is the thought that counts."<sup>111</sup> (South Asian-English accent and funny gestures)

In fact, through his comedic performance, Jobrani uncovers the limitations of Islamists and fundamentalists' ideologies by casting light on their minds. By way of echoing different trajectories and ideologies disseminating from various ethnic and cultural groups, Jobrani's *Axis* unfolds dialogism and heteroglossia enmeshed in the text and context. By doing so, the audiences are invited to find out distinct voices in the text and are, therefore, encouraged to distinguish between Muslims and Islamists, Middle Easterners and terrorists, fundamentalism and Islam. In other words, the *Axis* lays down its own voice by instructing the audiences not to believe in what they hear or see in the news. The audiences are prompted to experience new perspectives which oppose those published in the media.

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<sup>110</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>111</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

Almost near the end of the show, Jobrani admits that he has been “guilty of stereotyping”,<sup>112</sup> although he has tried to “break the stereotypes.”<sup>113</sup> In Dubai, he mistakes “an Indian man in cheap suit [with] a thin mustache staring at [him]” for his driver, while it turns out the Indian man “own[ed] the hotel.”<sup>114</sup> The hotel owner also thought that Jobrani was his driver. This is indicative of the types of misunderstanding that might exist among non-Western people who confront each other in funny yet meaningful situations. Jobrani implies that Indians in American media are shown as poorly paid working-class individuals such as servants and porters, and that he also fell prey to the common clichés and stereotypes in the hotel.

Jobrani executes political comedy and through this technique, he sets out not only to shatter the stereotypes, but also to expose racial discriminations and inequality deployed against Muslims, Arabs, and Iranians. He ends his show by making a final statement that reflects his intention for these stand-up comedy shows. He wraps up by saying, “I leave you guys with this: I try with my stand-up to break the stereotypes, present Middle Easterners in a positive light, Muslims in a positive light. And, I hope that in the coming years, more film and television programs come out of Hollywood presenting us in a positive light.”<sup>115</sup>

## **2. Of Ethnic Diversities, Differences, and Politics**

To complicate prevailing and one-directional voices in the media that act to conflate distinct categories, the *Axis* dwells upon common misconceptions about various

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<sup>112</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>113</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>114</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

<sup>115</sup> Youtube (see footnote 101).

ethnic groups in America and in the world. One can read the heteroglossic property and dialogism in the text; One of the common misunderstandings regarding Iranians or Persians is that they are Arabs, which is due to the vicinity of geographical borderlines. Another is that Iranians and Arabs speak the same language, that is, Arabic. To distinguish between the two ethnic categories, Maz Jobrani first explains that Iranians are Aryans and that they are white in terms of ethnic taxonomy. Then, he goes on to sneer at or self-deprecate Iranians and Arabs in terms of their English accents in a carnivalizing effort. Yet, one should also note the fact that the materials Jobrani presents are just a parody of what lies on the ground. That is, Jobrani uses body gestures and distorted accent in expressing serious matters, which add the quality of the carnivalesque to his performance. Body language and gesticulations are exaggerated, so much so that they target the speakers as the object of mockery. Thus, Jobrani implements techniques in parody along with the carnivalesque in order to make a clear-cut distinction between Persians and Arabs. I will examine some excerpts of Jobrani's work below:

I tell my American friends, I'm Iranian. They go, oh, so you're Arab. And I'm, like, no, we're actually different. But, you know, I mean, we're similar. You know, we're getting shot at. You know, that's one thing. But, you know, Iranians are ethnically, we are actually, we are Aryan, we are white, so stop shooting. (Laughter) And then my American friends go, well how can we tell you apart? How can we - and I go, it's in the accent. It's in the accent. Iranians - when Iranians speak they talk a lot slower, they talk like dees - slowly - Iranians talk like dees. (Persian accent) (Laughter) Iranians talk like dees. We talk very slow, like, you know, maybe just shot some heroin. We're falling asleep. (Laughter) How are you? I'm Iranian (Persian accent and intonation). How are YOU? (Stress is mine) (Laughter) It's Iranian. Okeydokey. It's Iranian. Take it easy. Don't worry about it (Laughter).<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCBQzCD5QMU> (accessed on November 2015).

At this point, Jobrani begins mimicking Arab accents by speeding up the pace of speech and producing harsh Arabic English accent. He continues:

And, Arabs talk faster. Arabs talk a lot faster. (He speeds uttering words in a row and also imitates Arabic-English accent) Arabs are, like, they're taking cocaine and talking: How are you? How are you habibi? (Meaning, my love) Ahlan wa sahan. (Meaning, you are welcome) (Laughter) Iranians are slow. We, like, you know, we, Iranians don't say they are Iranian, they say they are Persian (in Iranian accent). We say we are Persian. (The audience keeps laughing out loud) You know, it sounds nicer and friendlier. We even smile. We say we're Persian, we smile. I am PERSIAN (stress is mine). I am not dangerous. I am Persian. I Persian, like the cat. Meow. Meow. I am the cat. Meow (mimicking a cat's movement). I am Persian, like, the rug, hello! Rug, colorful, handwoven. (The whole paragraph should be read in a Persian English accent) (The audience keeps laughing in frenzy between Jobrani's sentences and phrases)<sup>117</sup>

In the very show, Maz Jobrani also scoffs at Iran's nuclear program by mentioning that Iranians claim their program is "peaceful."<sup>118</sup> He keeps holding the Iranian English accent throughout his comedy of Iranian nuclear program and adds his humor to speech. Jobrani opens up his comedy as follows; "Iranians, too. We are very sneaky, like, I am Persian, OK, we have a nuclear program, but it's a PEACEFUL nuclear program. (Stress is mine) (Laughter) Pause. We blow you up and we hug you! C'mon, take it easy."<sup>119</sup>

Additionally, Jobrani brings into limelight generalizations performed by mainstream white people about Middle Easterners in America. He says,

I get stupid questions. I've got a friend, any time the gas prices go up, he asks my opinion about it. He always asks me. Hang on, hang on. What's your opinion about this gas thing? (Laughter) What's gonna happen? What's going on? Fifty words or less. Bring it down. Would you? You're my Middle Eastern friend (Laughter)<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>118</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>119</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>120</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

The hilarious moment, though, occurs when Maz replies to his friend. His American friend by making fun of him and responding, “I’m like, dude, I don’t work at OPEC! I don’t know. I pay the same price as you. You know, I don’t go, like, discount pop at the gas station! I don’t walk in, like, Hassan, Hossein, discount pop? OK, my friend. (Laughter) Fuck America. Yeah? I get stupid questions.”<sup>121</sup>

Jobrani goes on and on in this show to mock how he was denied access to his Hotmail account for the sake of the words “terrorist” and “Al Qaida” he used in his reply to a friend. He explains how hard it was to convince Microsoft Corporation that it was only a joke and that he is a comic figure. He, additionally, warns the audience not to do so because they may experience the same thing he did.

Despite all the super-hilarious descriptions Maz Jobrani includes in this performance to show all the hard moments he went through to retrieve his Hotmail account, he sends an important message to the audience about respecting each other and sharing their happy moments. He states that he is a Muslim, but he also attends his non-Muslim friends’ ceremonies:

But, you know, what we love about what we do with our show, you guys, is all about putting out the positive and expressing that we can come together and laugh. You know, like, I always talk about this. You know, I’m originally Muslim, but I have friends from all religions, all ethnicities. I’ve told them man, you’re celebrating in a religion, let me know, I’m coming and I’m celebrating with you. And, I’ve done it, yeah! Yeah, man! (The audience applauds and shouts) I have Christian friends, I have Baha’i friends and Jewish friends, all of them. I celebrate. My Jewish friend, one time, actually invited me over for Sabbath dinner one time. Friday night. Yes, I went, I had and it was a great time... gave me matzo balls. I ate it and it was delicious. It was... gave me a Yamaka, I put it on. It was cool. Yeah! But it was weird cause as soon as I put on the Yamaka, I started coming up

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<sup>121</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

with business ideas. (Laughter) Is that supposed to happen? My I.Q increased by twenty points, my bank account doubled.<sup>122</sup>

It is worth noting how Jobrani conveys his message along with humor even when he is delving into a serious matter. As he continues his show, Jobrani talks about the misrepresentation of Muslims and Middle Easterners, which I argue is also the purpose of his *Axis*. He asserts what the media in the West show is always the negative side of Muslims. Yet, here again, Jobrani maintains his humor in targeting a serious issue:

The thing that frustrates me is when I see us on T.V. nowadays. Who always they show? They show the crazy dude burning American flag, going “death to America.” Always that guy. Just once I wish they would show us doing something good, man! Right? Just once, right? Yeah, man! Show us, like, doing something good, like, baking a cookie or something, right? Cause I’ve been to Iran. We have cookies. Just once, I want CNN be like, now we are going to Mohammad in Iran. They go to some guy, like, hello. I’m Mohammad, and I’m just baking a cookie. I swear to God. No bombs, no flags. Back to you, Bob.<sup>123</sup>

As such, Jobrani is directing his humor at both the Iranians who disrespect another country’s flag and the media outlets that selectively promote negativity among audiences. “Baking cookies”<sup>124</sup> is a normal activity someone from any country in the world may do, but that a Middle Easterner or Iranian is interviewed on CNN on a cooking show is almost unlikely. Jobrani even continues his sentence by adding a piece that is hilarious and insightful. He says, “They’re never gonna do that. Even if they did that’d follow up with another news piece, like, “this just in. A cookie bomb just exploded. Mohammad, you sneaky Persian.”<sup>125</sup> (Iranian American accent)

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<sup>122</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>123</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>124</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>125</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).



By this humorous comment, Jobrani launches his criticism against American media, such as CCN, which is a high-profile news outlet. To stress how Muslims are mistreated in the world, Jobrani gives another example from France, a country which has the largest Muslim population in Europe. Jobrani opens up the case of 2006 World Cup and talks about the brawl that occurred between Zinedine Zidane and Marco Materazzi. Jobrani recounts the story to the audience, yet describes the way Zidane as a Muslim player is criticized by the French themselves. Jobrani, in fact, shows how quickly a popular person loses his fame just because of his religion. Jobrani says:

[...] what I observed as a Middle Easterner. I watched the French reaction. Before the whole thing, the French love Zidane. They are like [Jobrani imitates a French English accent until the very end of this paragraph] “We love Zinedine Zidane. Zinedine Zidane is one of us. He is a French champion. We love him. He is the best. This Zinedine Zidane, we call him Zizou. He is the champ. We love him.” After the head-butt, they are like, this fucking guy is Algerian. (Laughter and applause) He’s Muslim.<sup>126</sup>

From the quote above, one can also learn about the multi-culturalism of France, the assimilation of Algerians into French culture, and yet the negation of Algerians by the French, all of which present themselves in sports events. Jobrani’s implicit remark that is conveyed through parody and the carnivalesque is that colonial subjects, such as Zidane, are expendables or short-lived assets. As long as a Muslim Algerian-French soccer player benefits France, he is regarded highly by the French, while he is simply discarded by the mainstream white population once he makes a mistake. In fact, Jobrani questions the assimilation of Algerians into the mainstream population of France. He alludes to the

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<sup>126</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

marginalization and negation of the Algerian-French, and the way the white French treat their once colony that is now an inescapable part of the colonial history of France.

Providing even more examples about the stereotypes arrayed against other ethnicities, Jobrani looks at common clichés regarding Asian societies. He talks about how Asians have proven successful in breaking stereotypes in commercials. He continues that there are car commercials that show an Asian driving a Mercedes Benz, while “the stereotype is Asians can’t drive cars,”<sup>127</sup> as Jobrani says. Yet, Jobrani’s comedy bears a two-sign system, which might be read otherwise. He says, “[...] if you wanna read between the lines, you could say Mercedes is making a racist statement. You could hear Mercedes say, hey, we’re safe car (Laughter and applause) so safe that Asians can drive it.”<sup>128</sup>

By “reading between the lines,”<sup>129</sup> Jobrani is inviting the audiences to look closely at the contents mainstream media are publishing regarding different ethnic groups. In other words, Jobrani encourages the viewers to read the “unsaid” aspect or level of meaning, which is one of the main characteristics of irony, as put forth by Hutcheon (1994, 60). Jobrani mentions Middle Easterners subsequent to Asians in his show, but he also talks about the common stereotypes attributed to Middle Easterners, which are completely different from those attributed to Asians. He continues,

Middle Easterners are not breaking stereotypes, not in commercials. Right? You never turn on the T.V., see United Airlines commercials with a Middle Eastern pilot (Laughter) You never see them say, “come, fly the friendly skies” (he

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<sup>127</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>128</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>129</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

imitates Middle Easterners' accent and makes a suspicious-looking face) I dare you (Laughter and applause)<sup>130</sup>

Thus, Jobrani closes the chapter of cultural stereotypes and moves to political humor.

Jobrani's political comedy begins when he turns to the subject of political leaders and how they spread antagonism against different nations. One can read different layers and levels of signification here:

And here is my thing: people are cool, man! People are cool! Politicians mess it up. Politicians put us against each other, I don't like any of them, ours, theirs, any of them (Laughter) Like Bush, I can't believe he is the president, even if you voted for him, you gotta admit, you gotta admit, every time he is on T.V, he doesn't look presidential (Laughter), he doesn't. Every time he is on T.V, I watch, I'm like, he is not the president (he bends over and makes funny gestures). Someone's pulling our legs. Someone's messing with us. Every time I see Bush on T.V, I'm waiting for Ashton Kutcher, like, we're punked. Osama running out of the cage, like, I was in on it, too (he keeps making funny gestures and running on the stage with distorted accents) (The audience laughs out loud). Makes sense. Osama has been hiding for six years. Think about it. That's a good hider, people! That guy's great. I can't hide for more than six minutes. This guy's doing it for six years. Osama is like Michael Jordan of hiders. Think about it. I bet you coming out of high school, he was voted most likely to "hide" (he makes air quotes). (Laughter) Like, I bet, when he was a kid, he was gonna play hide and seek. The other kids were pissed cause they knew it was gonna take forever (Laughter). Like, they were, "Osama's gonna play? (in Middle Eastern English accent) Ah, shit! Cause he's gonna take six years, you know? (Laughter) Okay, fine, go hide. I count, asshole! (Then, Jobrani covers his eyes as though he is playing hide and seek) (Laughter) One ... two ... we're gonna miss our high school graduation (Laughter). Three... Four ... he is so tall, how does he do it? Five ... Six ... Is he gonna hide in the cave again? Seven ... Eight ... and put out the video tapes? (Laughter)<sup>131</sup>

Jobrani keeps sneering at Osama Bin Laden until he turns to Iranian politicians. One can see the pinnacle of Jobrani's carnivalesque in this section, where he mimics Iranian politicians and Iranian-English accent. By de-crowning political figures and leaders, Jobrani aligns his stand-up comedy with the norms in the carnivalesque. On account of

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<sup>130</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

<sup>131</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

the carnivalesque, he shows how sensitive political decisions are made by intoxicated political leaders who use “opium,” and when high on drugs, they put the whole nation in jeopardy. I will incorporate this section of Jobrani’s *Axis* to show how he uses techniques, such as accent distortion and derisive body gestures that are the components of the carnivalesque in de-crowning the political figures in power. One should note, however, that Jobrani directs his ridicule at the then political administration in Iran, that is, Ahmadinejad administration, which has been harshly criticized by global community for increasing nuclear centrifuges during the time:

[...] Politicians of Iran are talking shit to America. Why would you talk shit to America? (Pause) America has recently bombed your neighbors. America has bombed Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran is in the middle (Laughter). It’s a good time to be quiet (He raises and distorts his own voice to add both humor and an alerting tone to his speech) (Laughter and applause). Right? Right? (Laughter) ... I tell you why Iran is talking shit. There’s a lot of opium usage in Iran (Laughter). Yes, the politicians are high (Laughter). You have to be high to talk shit to America 'cause opium is supposed to mellow you out, but I think it also makes you delusional (Laughter). I do. I think they’re getting high, and they go “You know what we should do? Let’s call America (A burst of laughter) (Pause). Give me the phone. Give me the phone. Give me the phone (Funny gestures and accent). Let me call, let me call. I feel good, let me call (Laughter continues). Hello America! (Distorted hilarious body gestures and posture) Fuck you! (Out loud Laughter and applause) (Jobrani still continues with his act of being high and intoxicated). Bring it on beech (Supposedly “bitch,” but because Jobrani is imitating Iranian-English accent, he pronounces as such) (Laughter). We kick your ass! (Persian accent) And then, he hangs up and goes, “Hey guys, do we have a military?” (Laughter) “Oh, we don’t? America, just kidding. I’m Persian, meow. Don’t shoot.” (Laughter and applause) The next day, the president of Iran’s like, “Did I drunk dial Bush again last night?” (Laughter)<sup>132</sup>

I examine the last two quotes above in detail now. However, before that, I would like to argue that all the following levels of meaning are in relation to the “unsaid” aspect of irony, as conceptualized by Hutcheon, which is embedded in Jobrani’s parody and the

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<sup>132</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

carnavalesque. First, by reading between the lines, one can understand how Jobrani suggests that America is a bully that invades other countries, and yet how simply its actions are justified under the aegis of fighting terrorism. Thus, by mentioning “Iraq” and “Afghanistan,” Jobrani is indicating that America, too, is heavily responsible for the wars in the Middle East. Second, Jobrani creates a clear-cut distinction between the states and nations in Iran, America, and Afghanistan. He names politicians in his performance to show that it is they who initiate wars against other nations, and that sadly it is a nation that falls victim to and pays for the aftermaths of inappropriate decisions made by incompetent politicians. Third, “opium” can serve as a metaphor for stupidity and frenzy. As much as opium causes hallucination and destroys sound judgments, irrationality can cause wrong decision-making and incur severe consequences. In a word, perhaps, politicians are delusional, which is Jobrani’s punch-line. Finally, what Jobrani stresses in this section is the absence of a sense of forward-looking among Iranian politicians, insofar as their actions arise from their delusions and illusions rather than from any sound logic. In simpler terms, Jobrani’s ridicule of the politicians in Iran suggests how things can get started catastrophically before any politician can ever think of the outcomes of his wrong actions beforehand.

Subsequently, Jobrani makes a statement that directly speaks to the purpose of his stand-up and the propitious atmosphere in American society that allows stand-up comedians to openly discuss and laugh at highly sensitive political issues in public settings. Jobrani draws a comparison between America and Iran in terms of the freedom of speech and the opportunities for holding such events in a democratic society such as America. One can argue that while attacking American politicians, Jobrani is giving

credit to America and, as such, he accentuates the slogans of “America, the land of opportunities,” and “America, the land of the free” very vigorously. I will include Jobrani’s comments, which are expressed humorously, below;

That’s the beauty of this country, guys. We can have these debates. We can talk about this. We should be critical of government, of politicians. You should be, and that’s the beauty of this country. And that’s why we can have these open debates, like, I can’t be having be making fun in front of the president of Iran in Iran. Right? You’ll be like, “Hey Maz, that was a good show. When’s your next show?” I’ll be like, “There are no more shows (Laughter). The ministry of ‘No Shows’ (Air quote) showed up (Laughter).”<sup>133</sup>

Then, Jobrani mentions Martin Luther King and Gandhi as the leaders who never lost themselves when they heard people expressing opposite opinions and ideas. One can contend that Jobrani is promoting the idea of tolerance, flexibility, and mutual respect, which are key elements in a democratic society. He continues and ends his show by making a final statement regarding the stereotypes and negativity attributed to Middle Easterners, and, thus, invites the audience to reconsider the contents of media. He expresses this message in a humorous tone that both instructs and entertains the audience:

[...] Okay, I’m gonna leave you guys with this really quickly. I’m gonna leave you with this (Pause). Please, I always say this. Please, stop blaming Middle Easterners for everything. Okay? And I always say (Laughter and applause) it’s not always us. Right? It is not always us, Okay? I mean, quite often it is, but not always (Laughter). We get point for everything, like, there was a blackout in New York a few years ago. The news came on, like, (He imitates a news anchor’s tone when he makes funny gestures) “There was a blackout. Terrorists might have been involved,” and a week later, they’re like, “Oops, sorry! Just end-run.” (Laughter) Right? “There was a traffic jam on the five. Terrorists might be involved. Oops, sorry! Just cars.” (Laughter) And, it started with anthrax. Remember the anthrax they tried to blame on us? I knew that wasn’t a Middle Easterner. That’s not how the Middle Easterners work. Middle Easterners are, like, (He imitates Middle Easterner English accent and makes gestures) “What? You want me to put the anthrax in the envelope, put the stamp on the envelope and mail it? No, no, no, no. That’s not how I do it. Can I wrap the anthrax around myself and run into

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<sup>133</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

somebody? (Laughter and applause) That is how I do it. You know, one, two, bang. You know what I'm saying? I can get two people. One, two. That's it.<sup>134</sup>

From the above-mentioned quote, one can also argue that Jobrani is suggesting that media are, on the one hand, propagating suspicion, paranoia, and xenophobia among Americans by linking even very ordinary incidents to terrorism. On the other, state-run media are responsible for the spread of hostility and enmity as they wantonly and blatantly victimize and demonize Middle Easterners in the news. Yet, one should also note that Jobrani never rejects the fact that there are some jihadist Middle Easterners who are involved in terrorism. He, in fact, denigrates politicians and media outlets for reducing terrorism and acts of violence to all Middle Easterners.

However, one may complicate Jobrani's attempt in breaking the stereotypes by contending that *Axis* reiterates the very negative images Jobrani tries to erase. Jobrani's repetition of stereotypes reflects the residues of the original materials he obtains from the media and other sources. Nonetheless, Jobrani's humor, I argue, and the way he presents his parodied discourse through exaggeration of distorted accents and postures speaks to the fact that he is making every effort to bring the erroneous behavior and conduct of both Western and Eastern societies to the fore. This can, therefore, be read as "unsaid" aspect or level of irony that lies beneath the denotative meaning or surface of the text (Hutcheon, 1994: 60). The ironic inferences and differing viewpoints are expressed in a humorous manner in the *Axis*. Therefore, one can argue that heteroglossia in Jobrani's comedy is the constellation of similar and opposing voices in a parodied and carnivalized way.

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<sup>134</sup> Youtube (see footnote 117).

## V. The Talks and Interviews: What Really Mattered in the *Axis*?

By including Jobrani's talks and interviews delivered in public places and academia, I attempt to show what lies behind the *Axis*'s text. Jobrani brings to the audiences and viewers the circumstances that gave rise to his stand-up project. By juxtaposing Jobrani's views, the texts, and contexts of the *Axis*, I unmask possible levels of meanings that can be communicated in his comedy. In general, very few of the talks dwell upon his *Axis* comedy. Therefore, I look at some Farsi and English interviews here that exclusively speak to the structure of Jobrani's *Axis*. Most specifically, I examine to what extent Jobrani's purpose of *Axis* was to reveal discriminations and racism exercised against Middle Easterners in America. Jobrani's straightforward comments will help understand what his comedy aims to convey to the audiences, and what techniques he has incorporated in his shows to make his work insightful and hilarious at the same time. To be precise, I look forward to Jobrani's use of parody and carnival, the two intertwined elements that enrich his performance on academic and performative levels.

Initially, I include a Farsi interview, in which Maz Jobrani touches upon a number of key elements in his comedy, that is, history of the work, objectives, techniques, and so forth. Then, I include other talks and interviews that expound other levels of Jobrani's *Axis* and career.



## 1. The Farsi Interview in America<sup>135</sup>

In a Farsi interview, Maz Jobrani talks about his career, especially the purpose of the formation of *Axis of Evil Tour*. Jobrani says that he began his career as a stand-up comedian in the year 2000 “at Comedy Store owned by an American-Jewish woman named Mitzi Shore in Los Angeles, where many world-class, renowned comedians such as Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jim Carrey, and Robin Williams began their career and later gained fame.”<sup>136</sup> I have incorporated major parts of the interview below;

In 2000, when the war between Israelis and Palestinians escalated, Mitzi Shore foresaw that there will be a need for a Middle Eastern comedian who would represent a positive voice in America. She formed a group called *Arabian Nights* made up of Ahmed Ahmed, an Egyptian-American, me, Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-American, and Allen Kader, a Palestinian-American. Having performed stand-up for about 4 or 5 years, the group decided to change the name to *Axis of Comedy Tour*. The reason for the new name came from Bush’s entitling the region Axis of Evil. We decided to make fun of him, because Bush’s title was ridiculous.<sup>137</sup>

Before I continue with the rest of the interview, I argue that Jobrani might not be aware of the theoretical terms and academic jargons such as parody and carnival. He simply uses “make fun of” or “ridiculous” in his speech, which can be interpreted as both carnivalesque and parody, insofar as he derived his material from Bush’s statement or, rather, he was inspired to counter the dominant view of the Middle East in a performative manner. In other words, as Jobrani jeeres at the then political agenda and policies in his comedy tour, I argue that Jobrani has rendered a parodied performance of the original, that is, Bush’s State of the Union Address in 2002. It goes without saying that what you

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<sup>135</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq6U5Zq97qA> (accessed on November 2015). Translation is mine.

<sup>136</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>137</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

see in Jobrani's *Axis* about American policies, especially that of Bush administration, bears a severe tone of derision and distorted mimicry, which can be associated to the carnivalesque. In the section that I discuss Jobrani's carnivalesque, where I talk about hilarious body gestures, postures, gesticulations, and imitated accents, I establish intimate links between Jobrani's *Axis* and carnival. I will now proceed to the rest of the interview below;

We took *Axis of Evil* and added Comedy to say that such a title was ridiculous. We toured with all the members for about two years or three until 2007. That is, we did comedy tour from 2000 to 2007 all across the world, America, Middle East and so forth. Since 2008, I've been doing my own programs, and now I am on a new tour I've called *Brown and Friendly*. As to the term *Brown* in my show, despite the fact that we are White, if you look at our skin color, you'll find that we are tan, too. Americans have thus put us in the same category into which Arabs, Pakistanis, and Indians fall. I told them that I accepted the name, yet you show a negative image of us. So, I'd like to show the positive as we are positive people, thus *Brown and Friendly*.<sup>138</sup>

When asked what he would do "if he were the president of America for only one hour,"<sup>139</sup> Jobrani replied that he would

throw a big party and invite all Iranian people to the White House. Then, the smell of Persian food and Iranians' perfume would fill the whole place, so much so that when Barak Obama comes back he would immediately sense all the aroma in air and understand that Iranians were in the place... but you know what? Iranians are always late to parties, so this one hour opportunity would end before Iranians could ever make it to the party. We have an hour for the party, but Iranians would come to the party two hours after the party was over... If you invited them, it should be for the whole night because if you asked them to be there at 6, they would be there at 9.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>139</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>140</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

Then, Maz Jobrani continues that such a party will “solve many of the problems. You don’t understand what I’m saying now, but you will a year or two from now.”<sup>141</sup> When asked “what he would do if he were the president of Iran,”<sup>142</sup> Maz Jobrani answers he would

throw a barbecue party and would invite all my American friends over to eat hotdog, hamburger, McDonald ... ketchup, mustard, American football. You know, a perfect party I would organize, Harley Davidson, Levis jeans, cowboy hats.” Maz Jobrani, then, asserts that by “food and parties as such, we are able to promote fellowship and establish peace in the whole world.”<sup>143</sup>

Almost near the end of the interview, Maz Jobrani looks directly into the camera and sends a message to all Iranians, Americans, politicians, and presidents of the world. He says, “Dear friends, American and Iranian friends, politicians. Eat food, have fun, and dance. And, please, be at my party on time. Done? We serve food at 9, and if you don’t make it on time, nobody saves food for you. Oh, there’s tea, as well.”<sup>144</sup> Jobrani ends the interview with Omar Khayyam’s poem to emphasize the significance of the present in a *Carpe Diem* undertone. He recites,

And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,  
End in the Nothing all Things end in--Yes-  
Then fancy while Thou art, Thou art but what  
Thou shalt be--Nothing--Thou shalt not be less.

(Rendered into English verse by Edward FitzGerald).<sup>145</sup>

Given the quotes above, I raise a couple of points before I move on to another interview;

First, by showing that Middle Easterners are positive people, Jobrani is rendering a

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<sup>141</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>142</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>143</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>144</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

<sup>145</sup> Youtube (see footnote 136).

criticism directed at American corporate media outlets that promote negativity against Muslims and Middle Easterners. Thus, Jobrani is defying the discursive regimes that demonize a certain ethnicity. Second, Jobrani introduces the metaphor of food (“hotdog,” “McDonald,” along with Persian food in the “White House,”), as well as eating, and dancing to imply that nations would leave their enmity aside only when they got to know each other better. To this end, Jobrani adds Omar Khayyam’s poem to his former comments to highlight the significance of celebrating life and to stress that the absence of mutual understanding can result in hostility and enmity among nations. Third, to emphasize the positivity of Iranian culture, Jobrani mentions perfume (Iranians commonly wear perfume and the aroma is sometimes too much), and the smell of Iranian food, in a way that even Obama would understand that Iranians had held a party at White House. This can also be read as a counter-discourse towards the lines of negativity against Middle Easterners and Iranians. Fourth, Jobrani never gives primacy to Iranian culture over American culture. He also shows the annoying part of Iranian culture by mentioning the time the party begins and asking Iranians to be punctual. In a humorous way, Jobrani launches a mild criticism about the negative aspects of Iranian culture, which means he is impartial and just in his representation of both American and Iranian cultures. The fact that he includes both positive and negative sides of each culture proves that Jobrani’s stance towards Iranians and American is not rooted in emotional grounds, but that he tries to be as straightforward and unbiased in this interview as he can be on his stand-ups.

## 2. The Interview in Bahrain<sup>146</sup>

In many of his English interviews, Jobrani talks about the history of the *Axis* along with other similar subjects that I find redundant to be incorporated here. The topics he discusses are of the ones about the way Middle Easterners are misrepresented in American media, as well as the common stereotypes associated to the region and its people. However, in the interview in Bahrain, Jobrani answers a question that is related to his creativity and method of presenting the materials. My argument is that Jobrani's response to the question demonstrates his method in presenting the old topics in a witty way or in a new light, so much so that the audience laughs at the way the materials have been twisted and exaggerated. Jobrani's response proves that his performance is very much in connection to parody due to copying and rendering of the original in a different way. I look at this segment of the interview below;

Interviewer: How do you come up with different styles? ... Or, how do you come up with different (Pause) (Jobrani helps the interviewer) materials? (Both say the same word)

Jobrani: The materials we a lot of time come up with are just me and things that strike me, eh ... If it's a political thing or eh ... it's a social thing, it usually means reading an article and securing something in the news. A lot of times, it's just based on the mistreatment of Middle Easterners or Muslims in the West. So, I'll bring that to the attention of the audience, just to remind them that there's still racism and discrimination going on. And, then, I make fun of the people who discriminated against (Pause) our people, basically.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2vihXaxw9E> (accessed on November 9, 2015).

<sup>147</sup> Youtube (see footnote 147).

### 3. The Interview in Sweden<sup>148</sup>

Maz Jobrani delivers an interview in Sweden in a talk show. What may strike Jobrani's talk here is the way he approaches a question he is asked regarding Americans and their behavior towards Iranians. I pick on this very question to show Jobrani's method in ridiculing American and Iranian politicians in a humorous manner.

Interviewer: Do you think Americans are well-informed about the Middle Eastern countries?

Jobrani: Not at all. I think some Americans just think that it is just all one country. I've had conversations with people, "Just bomb the whole country" (Jobrani imitates a provincial or rustic type of accent) ... It's funny cause even with the whole Iraq war, being from Iran, I was afraid. I was, like, if there's one president who's gonna mess it up, and bomb the wrong country (Laughter). George Bush, you know? One letter!

Interviewer: So, do you believe George Bush was a better person for a comedian?

Jobrani: Oh, he was a gift for comedians (Laughter). You know, cause being from Iran, we have Ahmadinejad, who is a gift for comedians. He says all kinds of crazy stuff. Then, you had George Bush, and now we have Sarah Palin in America (Laughter). I think those three should do a tour together (Laughter). A comedy tour, like, *We Don't Mean to Be Funny*, but they are (Laughter).<sup>149</sup>

From the quotes above, one can easily see how Jobrani brings to the fore American's poor knowledge of geography, specifically, that of Middle Eastern countries. He slams politicians regarding their inability in distinguishing Iraq from Iran, "One letter," meaning "q" and "n," which could lead to "bomb[ing] the wrong country."<sup>150</sup> Such a mistake never happened, yet Jobrani is exaggerating here, especially when he mimics the

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<sup>148</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BApv4hblhRo> (accessed on December 15, 2015).

<sup>149</sup> Youtube (see footnote 149).

<sup>150</sup> Youtube (see footnote 149).

rustic accent. Jobrani, in fact, highlights that there are Americans who have the slightest idea about where Iran is, and yet they try to make severe political comments about Iran. Ahmadinejad, the then president of Iran during the show, was also not better than Bush in terms of political knowledge and understanding of the world countries. Therefore, no matter how hard these three figures tried to be serious and persuasive in their addresses, they stood as irrational politicians, thus they can fit together, as Jobrani states, in a comedy tour entitled “*We Don’t Mean to Be Funny.*”<sup>151</sup> In summary, Jobrani is depicting politicians as unreliable people who are responsible for the wars in the world. As to the technical and academic levels of this excerpt of the interview, I argue that Jobrani performs carnivalesque to some extent, in the sense that when playing the red-neck accent, he imitates the accent and slightly makes a funny face to mock this class in America. Meanwhile, when Jobrani mentions Bush, Palin, and Ahmadinejad as the sources of materials for his comedy, he acknowledges that his performance heavily depends on politicians’ blunders and bloopers, thus his comedy is a derided copy or parody of the original material.

#### 4. The Interview in Canada<sup>152</sup>

In an interview on Q TV in Canada, Jobrani answers a number of questions regarding his act and career, but I will specifically pick up on the section where Jobrani talks about the *Axis*. When asked if it was “ironic that the effect of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks actually helped to bring together a burgeoning Middle Eastern comedy scene in

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<sup>151</sup> Youtube (see footnote 149).

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvD9oVw-xAK> (accessed on December 9, 2015).

America,”<sup>153</sup> Jobrani gives a response that corresponds to representation of Middle Easterners before and after the terrorist attacks in America. Jobrani describes “the depiction of Middle Easterners,”<sup>154</sup> which was not at all positive, “for the past 50 or 100 years.”<sup>155</sup> He admits that he “made fun of” such a depiction in his shows, and that after the September 11 disaster, the image was “exponentially out there even more.”<sup>156</sup> Talking about his techniques or methods in lampooning both Western and Eastern audiences, Jobrani maintains that he made “fun of anything that ... deserv[ed] being made fun of.”<sup>157</sup> Then, he adds, “First of all, we’ve gotta laugh at ourselves ... and we are laughing together. I’m laughing with you, not at you. I never say, oh we are better than you. And so, the same thing goes for, you know, if I make fun of my background, I’m making fun of some silly things we do.”<sup>158</sup> Jobrani mentions how Iranians tried to call themselves Western names to be treated better in America, which he considers to be the “silly things”<sup>159</sup> he mocks in his stand-ups. Therefore, launching self-criticism is one of the techniques, whereby Jobrani brings to limelight and mocks a number of cultural and social materials through his performative comedy. Yet, as Jian Ghomeshi, the interviewer said, it is “ironic” that the attacks helped Middle Eastern stand-up comedy come to exist and rise. My argument is that the irony lies in the impact of Muslims’ depiction in the West that worked otherwise. Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran, that were not known to many Americans, became the center of attention in the news. In other

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<sup>153</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).

<sup>154</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).

<sup>155</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).

<sup>156</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).

<sup>157</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).

<sup>158</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).

<sup>159</sup> Youtube (see footnote 153).



words, *Axis of Evil* emerged as a response to rectify the misrepresentation of all Middle Easterners, hence a counter-discourse to the dominant discourses promoted in media.

## **VI. After the Axis: Further Endeavors**

Thus far, the attempt in this chapter has been to investigate Maz Jobrani's humor, as well as his career as a stand-up comedian on the stage. At this point, though, in my research I intend to unfold a recent aspect of Jobrani's career that is progressively flourishing. Jobrani has appeared in a number of American TV series and movies, and has been acting since he was a child. He has recently written a book entitled *I'm Not a Terrorist but I've Played One on TV* (2015), in which he gives insight into life in America on several fronts, such as host and migrant cultures, misunderstandings, discriminations, and other pertaining subjects. In some of his appearances as a guest speaker, which I will discuss below, Maz Jobrani assumes a role that is different from that in his stand-up comedies. Jobrani equips his readers and audiences with a new perspective toward life in America, which is replete with shades of personal and communal views. His on-the-stage presence is no more limited to stand-up comedy settings across the world, although he has played a significant role in exposing stereotypes and clichés against Muslims and Middle Easterners, in general, and Iranians, in particular. Jobrani's presence in academia and his name on the bookshelves mean a transition, if not necessarily a transformation, in his career. Thus, Maz Jobrani does not restrict his appearance to stand-up comedy tours, but he tries to spread his message to other areas, such as literature and academia, that yet engage a larger fraction of American population. Having performed stand-up comedy for 17 years, Maz Jobrani is taking his insight one step further to intellectuals and scholars. He has shifted his route from

amphitheaters and halls to libraries and academic spheres, meaning Jobrani has become the subject of attention to different strata in American society.

### 1. Jobrani in Newport Beach Public Library Foundation<sup>160</sup>

Very recently, Maz Jobrani attended a convergence organized by Newport Beach Public Library Foundation and gave a talk about his book. In the talk, he first delves into his own life history, telling the audience that he always wanted to be “Eddie Murphy” someday, despite his parents’ desire for him to be either “a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer.”<sup>161</sup> He says this in a humorous tone yet he reveals an important aspect of Iranian culture that shows how much Iranian parents want their children to earn higher professional positions and social status. He also talks about his father’s thick Persian accent when he spoke English and his poor knowledge of the host culture after they had arrived in the United States. His father once asked a 14-year-old ice-cream girl to marry Maz, who was 10 or 11 years old at the time. This sort of behavior is considered rude and not funny in American culture, while it is just a joke in Iranian culture.

In his book, as he explains to the audience in Newport Beach, he maintains that he used to act in a set of plays arranged by the school when he was in junior high school. He says, “My parents would dress like they were out for a night at the opera. I mean, my father is in this suit, my mother in this dress, my aunt is in a mint coat... and then, I’m like ‘what are you doing?’ and they are embarrassing.”<sup>162</sup> Thus, the audience comes to

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<sup>160</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTFU1OJS7hY> (accessed on December 15, 2015).

<sup>161</sup> Youtube (see footnote 161).

<sup>162</sup> Youtube (see footnote 161).

know about not only the Iranian culture, but also about American culture through the eyes of an Iranian-American immigrant. On the one hand, the book brings to the readers very private experiences, the gaffs and blunders, and awkward moments Jobrani observed in his immediate family, and, on the other, the book brings along Jobrani's experiences of getting established in America as an actor and a stand-up comedian. The latter perspective is highly significant as it comes along with bitter sweet memories and difficulties a Middle Eastern immigrant encounters on the social level. Jobrani states that "if you are not gonna travel, at least read the book and see that ... we are not all terrorist."<sup>163</sup> It is a response to Donald Trump in one of his rallies, in which Muslims were said to be a major problem to America, as Jobrani mentions.

In Jobrani's book, one may embark on a journey and see all the hilarious events he personally experienced. The book dwells upon subjects in connection to Jobrani's immediate family, as well as his career as a stand-up comedian and an actor. As such, the readers will get to know about the image of the world that is opposed to the sort of narrative provided by American media outlets. Jobrani has been travelling across the world, and each chapter of the book, he touches upon a new angle regarding his lived experiences in a certain country or region.

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<sup>163</sup> Youtube (see footnote 161).

## 2. Jobrani at the University of Delaware<sup>164</sup>

On October 21, 2015, University of Delaware invited Maz Jobrani to deliver a talk on the issue of race in the United States. The recent Black Life Matters movement animated many debates and mobilized a large number of social activists to stand up for black people fifty years after Martin Luther King, Jr. came forward to express openly the equality of social rights for black Americans. As Lindsay Hoffman, the Director of National Agenda Program and the Associate Director of the Center for Political Communication, mentioned at the beginning of the forum, the objective of such talks is to “create a space for such a dialogue”<sup>165</sup> on race issues in America. She also encouraged the audiences to participate in the talk either personally or via Twitter. She added that they were expecting for a “civil and respectful dialogue” during the event and asked the audiences to express their opinions “candid[ly]” yet “courteous[ly].”<sup>166</sup> These special features of the forum at Delaware, that is, an open and collective space for a talk about one of the commonly debated topics in the United States, such as race and identity, demonstrates the endeavours a university invests in creating a dialogic atmosphere. To obtain a better understanding of the main purpose of the talk and how Jobrani discusses a wide range of topics that deal with racism, stereotypes, and many relevant points, I will delve more into this event, but try to avoid some of the subjects that do not contribute to my mainstream argument.

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<sup>164</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etHQxlp84lg> (accessed on December 10, 2015).

<sup>165</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

<sup>166</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

One should note that Jobrani is not a stand-up comedian only, but he has also appeared in a number of films and TV shows, such as three Show Time Specials, *American Hero*, *The Descendants*, *Shirin in Love*, as well as fifty guest star appearances, such as *Homeland*, *True Blood*, *Shameless*, and *Grey's Anatomy*.

The significance of Jobrani's presence at Delaware was due to his perspective toward race in America as he extensively uses humour to touch upon "race and the misunderstanding of Middle Easterners by Americans"<sup>167</sup> in his performances. Hoffman states it directly that Jobrani's "perspective brings insight into the discussion of race and how humour can elaborate upon issues in a non-confrontational way."<sup>168</sup> Thus, the important role of stand-up comedy in a democratic society, such as America, which allows the audiences and the stand-up comedians to participate collectively in the performance becomes even more discernable when Maz Jobrani presents his perspective on race in academia. One can also read this as one of the main characteristics of the carnival, as I discussed in detail earlier, which brings the spectators and the performer together and also invites them to partake in the act without being tied to any restrictions or constraints.

It is helpful to note that there is a conflation of academic and public perspectives that help recognize American society's major pitfalls. More specifically, Jobrani's presence in academia is proof that universities have come to the realization that novel ideas derive from not only academic scholars, but also from a combined form of

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<sup>167</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

<sup>168</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

academic and non-academic activities that examine public opinion and investigate the public perception of socio-political affairs.

At Delaware, Maz Jobrani dwells upon a set of current issues, ranging from Donald Trump's election campaign to Hollywood's biased taste for Middle Eastern actors. In fact, he brings very common issues confronting not only American citizens, but also all ethnicities in the world. Another aspect of Jobrani's presence as a guest speaker at University of Delaware is the fact that Jobrani does not give voice to Middle Easterners only, but he also stands for all nations that have been, in some way or another, marginalized or oppressed. This, however, is different from being a role model for a certain diasporic community. In fact, Jobrani at Delaware mentions that there have been people from within the Iranian community who told him that he could be a "role model" for Iranians or that he was the "voice" of Iranians. He disagrees with this idea and continues, "I don't wanna be a role model. I do what I like to do."<sup>169</sup> However, despite Jobrani's claim to the contrary, his performance stands as one of the prominent and often heard voices upon the stage that are very influential in bringing awareness and understanding to not only American audiences, but also to all audiences in the world over. Jobrani's travels to many regions across the world and his effort to present Muslims and minorities in a positive light perfectly speaks to his intention in raising consciousness on a global level. When asked in one of his live performances on Twitter as to how ethnic minorities can change the current biased mentality towards Middle Eastern actors in Hollywood, Jobrani answered that it all depended on the people on the "backstage" with Middle Eastern background. Like African Americans or Latinos who once had

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<sup>169</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

trivial roles, such as being drug dealers or villains, Middle Easterners are also trying to get a promising place in Hollywood today. Hollywood's notion aside, if one reads between the lines, he or she understands that Jobrani has been successful in establishing himself as a figure that strives to break down common clichés and stereotypes by presenting a different angle of Middle Easterners. Jobrani struggles to present an image of Middle Easterners that rigorously resists the corporate media's image fed to Americans, that is, a violence loving, anarchist, non-laughing, anti-woman, uncivilized, uneducated, backward, superstitious person. At Delaware, Jobrani specifically dwells upon media's role in portraying Muslims and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Sham) that can drastically affect a child's ability in recognizing different ethnic appearances. To prove his point, Jobrani maintains that a child of a friend's was terrified at the sight of an Indian Sikh in a movie theater, taking the Indian to be a member of ISIS. He explains to the boy that a turban and beard do not mean that someone is an ISIS member. In a humorous way, Jobrani adds that, "an ISIS man in the cinema might have come to see his last movie before blowing himself up."<sup>170</sup> In fact, what Jobrani insinuates is that media escalate the misunderstanding of Muslims and Middle Easterners by Americans in a way that even a child is not excepted in debates on race, identity, and social and national security. Jobrani's rejection of playing terrorist parts offered by Hollywood was a grave decision he made to let his agents know that he, and probably other Middle Eastern actors, do not intend to play the roles that misrepresent Middle Easterners and Muslims. Jobrani continues that such an intention was difficult at first, but it worked because he has been offered the roles that do not bring negativity about Middle Easterners. Jobrani

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<sup>170</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

asks, “Why a laughing Middle Eastern father is never shown to the audiences or why almost no movie shows successful Muslims, such as doctors, nurses, engineers, professors, and many other professions in Western societies?”<sup>171</sup> He also feels sorry for the terrorist roles he acted in a movie before, and his book, to some extent, entails his reflection upon Hollywood’s policies in demonizing Muslims.

In an exchange of opinions between an audience member and himself, Maz Jobrani puts forth that Middle Easterners have “a great sense of humour,”<sup>172</sup> which is unknown to Westerners, and what he performs in his stand-up comedies directly unfolds this aspect of their culture. It is important to note that a specific aspect of culture in the Middle East is exposed through a brief conversation between the stand-up comedian and the viewer. The cooperation between the two unveils an often dismissed yet salient aspect that is rarely discussed, thus barely known and understood by Americans. The dialogue that occurs between Jobrani and the audience members and between Lindsay Hoffman – who sits beside Jobrani and asks him questions that are posed by other people on Twitter – is proof of the existence of different perspectives that come from other segments of American society. The convergence of opinions and perspectives forms the dialogic space Hoffman aimed to produce as she mentioned early at the beginning of the forum. One may also tend to examine Bakhtin’s dialogism and heteroglossia and the affinity of such notions with Hoffman’s efforts and Jobrani’s invited talks in this context. However, it is beyond the scope of my research to dwell upon the above-mentioned notions as this chapter specifically deals with the carnivalesque and parody in Jobrani’s *Axis* and

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<sup>171</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).

<sup>172</sup> Youtube (see footnote 165).



describes his subsequent projects in other areas of art. Having said that, I will now return to Delaware event.

The Delaware experience is yet a different phase of Jobrani's career that appears in the wake of *Axis*. There is no *Axis of Evil* tour and Jobrani is passing his experiences to the audiences that have very little knowledge of the self-experienced level of Jobrani's performances. In other words, Jobrani brings to the audiences a different angle of the post-9/11 era that is reported through his eyes over the course of his performances. The way Jobrani has experienced the post-9/11 atmosphere is different from the American public did in the sense that Jobrani connected with not only Americans afterwards, but also with the people of the world by performing in Europe and in the Middle East. He received feedback and responses from the Muslims in the United States and those in the Middle East when he performed in Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain. These responses contrast with the suppressed, screened, filtered, and beamed images of Muslims that are depicted to Americans through American corporate media. In other words, Jobrani enlightens the American audiences of different images of Muslims and non-Muslims by confronting them with the realm beyond their normal imaginary and common understanding, which is constructed by stereotyping and essentialization. Thus, Jobrani's self-experiences introduce yet another level of understanding and recognition to American audiences that might not have been attained otherwise.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Jobrani's comedy performances can, on the one hand, be strongly linked to parody, in the sense that he obtains his stage materials from the ongoing social and political

issues. In his effort to present his performative narrative, Jobrani gives a new spin to the original materials and creates a new product through witticism, irony, and the carnivalesque. This combined form of performance subverts the original and, yet more importantly, exposes the idiocies in social habits, practices, conventions, intellectual grounds, and public behavior, hence heteroglossic. However, *Axis* hardly ever unpacks gender issues in his shows. Since *Axis* launched its witticism against political states and social configurations, it neglected to incorporate specific areas such as gender issues in its agenda. If Jobrani had included gender issues in *Axis*, he could have brought a wider range of topics to his audiences and would have made his performance more provocative.

On the other hand, Jobrani conceives a type of political humor that enlightens the public, and is not intended to make the audiences laugh only. That is, despite being a stand-up comedy that carries entertainment with it, Jobrani's performances open up new intellectual horizons towards understanding commonly and easily ignored matters, such as discrimination, stereotyping, racism, inequality, marginalization, hegemony, and so forth. As Shields discusses, the carnival "breaks down barriers...overcomes power inequities and hierarchies, [and] reform[s] and renew[s] relationships both personal and institutional" (97).

In Bakhtin's view, carnivalesque discourse that exists in literature [...] addresses the hierarchy and power that constrain so much of human life, that result in some people being marginalized while others are accepted, some being oppressed and others privileged, some voices being heard and others silenced. In carnival, Bakhtin tells us, the first aspect of life that is suspended is the hierarchical structures that determine our "proper" place—including the acceptable ways of talking, dressing,

laughing, and celebrating. Everything, he claims, that is associated with socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality—including fear, awe, holiness, and good manners—is suspended. (101)

Political comedy has been around for several centuries, and appears to resemble today's sitcoms. As Machiavelli utilized comedy for the purposes of delight and instruction, the audience was also subjected to views regarding politics (Combs and Nimmo, 1996). In combining laughter and learning, Chapman and Foot (1996) write,

The view that laughter was closely allied to derision and was a socially disruptive force persisted for some time and Ben Jonson (1599) was one of the first notable litterateurs to suggest that comedy inevitably functioned as a social corrective in its use as criticism of the follies of mankind. Later, Moliere and Swift likewise used humor in the form of satire mirroring the social foibles and hypocrisy of seventeenth and eighteenth century Western society. (1)

Maz Jobrani's stand-up comedy, too, searches for a corrective to be applied to the follies of American society. Jenkins observes that by acting the role of ordinary citizens, clowns generated laughter by which they were able to "confront injustice, unmask hypocrisy, and debunk pomposity" (2).

As can be associated to Maz Jobrani's stand-up, American humorists are social commentators and critics of the states. Jenkins acknowledges that: "By comically questioning government policies and satirically attacking political leaders American clowns demonstrated that even the humblest of citizens was capable of analyzing public problems, debating controversial issues, and making decisions for themselves" (2). Other scholars such as Combs and Nimmo (1996) state that "making fun of mistakes called attention to them in order to seek a corrective" in the past (6). Hall, Keeter and Williamson (1993) state that humour is an important element in bringing our social world into light and that it is found in all societies. Even in ancient Greece, humour served a

crucial part in sustaining democracy (Jenkins 1984). During that era, when Old Comedy was a common pastime, the theater was the venue in which “problems were debated, corruption was uncovered, and injustices were corrected” (10). As Walker (1998) concurs, “The fact that democracy encourages the participation of its citizens in the development of its institutions allows those same citizens freedom to criticize both the nation’s leaders and its laws” (8). Walker admits that humour plays out vigorously in the development of a democratic polity by maintaining that,

Because the ideals embodied in the promises of democracy are just that – ideals and not necessarily realities – a great deal of American humor, whether overtly political or not, has pointed to the discrepancies between the grand promises of equality, prosperity, and fulfillment and the actualities of socioeconomic class differences, discrimination, and corruption. (8)

Finally, by incorporating their critical views into a comic context, comedians, such as Jobrani, communicate their messages more easily without having them considered morally forbidden. *Axis* has been successful in constructing a discourse that exposes prevailing disparities among American citizens, and Jobrani has been even more successful by transporting his notions to other realms of art such as film and literature.

**CHAPTER THREE: Reading Cultural Representations and Irony: Dissecting the Discourse of Ramin Niami's Romantic Comedy *Shirin in Love* (2014)**

As the first step in analysing Niami's film, it is important to shed light on the historical context to see what aspects of the Iranian culture and community the text incorporates. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iranians have constantly been demonized in Western media and films, and news outlets have never ceased to malign the image of Iranians. Films such as *Not without My Daughter* (1991), *300* (2006), *Argo* (2012), and *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014) are only few examples that spread negativity about not only modern Iran but also ancient Persia. The alleged truth, propaganda, and narratives American state-run media have been scattering against Iranians since the Revolution of 1979 have widened the gap between the two nations. The common stereotypical Iranian image is that of a backward and uneducated person who has also become a terrorist following the 9/11 attacks. For this reason, it is important to investigate the type of imaginary Niami's text constructs regarding Iranians, in general, and the Iranian community of Los Angeles, in particular.

Ramin Niami's *Shirin in Love* (2014) is the first professionally made Iranian-American film, and the first Iranian-American romance comedy to date,<sup>173</sup> that *prima facie* introduces to the American audiences the Iranian community living in Los Angeles, America. However, under the surface structure, there are a number of critical concepts such as cultural representations, gender relations, social class, and hybridity enmeshed in

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<sup>173</sup> I have searched for other professionally made Iranian filmic project(s) in America produced prior to Niami's film. However, I did not find any other filmic artefact, and for this reason, Niami's *Shirin in Love* is the point of departure and the main work under my analysis in this chapter.

the humor of the text. The concepts above also account for the altering and possible levels of meaning and/or ironic inferences that can be grasped by the audiences. *Shirin* revolves around the life story of Shirin, a law graduate and a book critic, who wants to chase her dream, and instead of Mike, her lifelong friend, she decides to marry William. Mike who is a rich Persian-American plastic surgeon and loves Shirin eventually respects Shirin's decision, although he expresses his discontent about Shirin's decision first. Maryam, Shirin's mother, is depicted as "sculpted, peroxidized, Type-A embodiment of the controlling Persian mother,"<sup>174</sup> who plots against Shirin, yet she, like Mike, surrenders to her daughter's decision in the end. The Washington Post offers its review of the characters in a synopsis as follows;

Shirin (Nazanin Boniadi) meets her Prince Charming (Riley Smith) after a long night of partying in "Shirin in Love." The problem: She's engaged to another man. The heroine of "Shirin in Love" is pretty, charming and klutzy. Played by "Homeland's" Nazanin Boniadi, Shirin is a well educated but underemployed resident of Tehrangeles, the expat community of Los Angeles. Her principal vocation is writing book reviews for a Beverly Hills magazine run by the shallow, domineering Maryam (Anita Khalatbari), who happens to be Shirin's mother. A law school graduate, Shirin could be doing more with her life. But she's just hanging around, awaiting her marriage to Mike (Maz Jobrani), an Iranian American plastic surgeon.<sup>175</sup>

However, the summary above is a simplistic reading of the story, especially the way in which the author describes the main characters without mentioning their impact on the plot of the story. The Washington Post also makes a brief mention of Shirin (Nazani Boniadi) by way of critiquing the director:

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<sup>174</sup> See Rogerbert.com, which is a film review website, for a full review of Niami's Shirin: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shirin-in-love-2014> (retrieved on March 15, 2016).

<sup>175</sup> See, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/shirin-in-love-movie-review/2014/03/19/92f9bec0-aabe-11e3-98f6-8e3c562f9996\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/shirin-in-love-movie-review/2014/03/19/92f9bec0-aabe-11e3-98f6-8e3c562f9996_story.html) (accessed on March 16, 2016).

Although Boniadi makes Shirin nearly as likable as she's supposed to be, writer-director Ramin Niami's movie is crudely contrived and sloppily edited. The movie's first hour lurches from one absurd setup to the next, although everything else that happens seems almost plausible when compared to the preposterous sequence in which William deals with the unconscious Shirin.<sup>176</sup>

The Washington Post references the scene where Shirin gets intoxicated at her mother's party and leaves the house. William takes her to a motel, changes her dress, and lets her in bed to rest. One may agree with the Washington Post's commentary on the shortcomings of the plot as sequencing of the events may pick up a hasty pace. Nicolas Rapold of the New York Times cites other weaknesses of the work as follows,

Dull filmmaking and spiritless dialogue can together feel like a curse that hangs over actors, stifling their every other scene. Nominally a romantic comedy in the ethnic-family subgenre, "Shirin in Love" is a case in point, plodding along with the young Iranian-American writer of the title as she gets cold feet about marrying her fiancé, a surgeon, and pursues the son of an interview subject.<sup>177</sup>

Aaron Hillis of the Village Voice looks at the plot of the film and argues that the plot is devoid of twists and turns, so much so that the audience can simply foreshadow the subsequent scenes of the story. Hillis does not find anything particular about this film and maintains,

Aside from a handful of translated Farsi colloquialisms ("Has your brain flown away?" meaning "Are you out of your mind?") and a multiculti soundtrack, there's very little to distinguish this from every other characterless rom-com with a demographically marketable hook.<sup>178</sup>

Despite all the weaknesses regarding various elements in the film as mentioned by the critics above, I suggest that Niami's text strives to represent the Iranian community of

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<sup>176</sup> The Washington Post (see footnote 175).

<sup>177</sup> See [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/movies/shirin-in-love-directed-by-ramin-niami.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/movies/shirin-in-love-directed-by-ramin-niami.html?_r=0) (accessed March 15, 2016).

<sup>178</sup> See <http://www.villagevoice.com/film/a-quarter-life-crisis-and-culture-clashing-love-story-shirin-in-love-6441279> (accessed March 17, 2016).

Los Angeles to American audiences and attempts to re-invent and re-negotiate Iranianness in the context of multiculturalism of American society. Niami's film shows that the Iranian community of Los Angeles is not estranged from the rest of the American population, but, like other ethnicities in America, the Iranian community is an inalienable ethnic segment of the American population and society.

## **I. Ironic Inferences: Unravelling the Text and Contexts**

In this section, I unveil implied and unsaid meanings that come across the text and contexts of Niami's film. Cultural representations, gender relations, and social class implications are the major concepts I explore below, but, more importantly, I investigate to what extent my reading of Niami's *Shirin* can complicate the afore-mentioned concepts and add significance to a critical analysis of the film.

### **1. The Problem of Cultural Representations**

In an interview in Farsi, Ramin Niami talks about Americans' imaginary of the East and Iran, in particular. He explains that his film attempts to complicate the prevailing images attributed to Iranians by rectifying the stereotypes about Iranians in American media. Niami describes his filmic project as a counter-discourse to all the negativity ascribed to Iranians over American media outlets.<sup>179</sup> Niami elucidates that his purpose was to construct a new system of cultural representations. Therefore, Niami indicates that his filmic production challenges the common stereotypes about Iran in

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<sup>179</sup> See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6hyMsiLJb4> (accessed on October 10, 2015). Translation is mine.



America, which is under the direct impact of media coverages and a variety of propaganda.

Given the impact of American media outlets and their purposes, Noam Chomsky presents a detailed analysis in *Manufacturing Consent*. Chomsky attacks American corporate media and the nature of a democratic polity, arguing that it is presumed that a democratic country, such as America, reports the truth through its media outlets. However, the opposite is true because the media cover the news in the best interests of the elite and powerful figures who own the media. As a result, many ethnic voices are not heard or are oppressed, and not every citizen is allowed to participate in the decision-making processes. According to Stuart Hall, it is crucial for the hegemonic powers to sustain control on discourse, especially at the level of interpretation, as “[I]t is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge (...) [S]ubjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the episteme, the discursive formation, the regime of truth, of a particular period and culture. (...) the ‘subject’ is produced within discourse” (Hall 55).

Therefore, it is not only the question of authority that has the power to speak and engage in the act of representing a nation, but, more importantly, it is the control of the sign or the words. Niami allows his Iranian and American characters to navigate within certain boundaries that he sets up through the language of his film. The characters in the film may produce knowledge about their community and culture, but they are themselves the constructs of the discourse of the film. Niami as such attempts to generate the imaginary that runs counter to the mediated imaginary about Iran in America. It is also ironic because Niami uses America as the setting of his film, yet depicts the Iranian

community in America the way he wants it to be, which is similar to what Dumas does in her memoirs. In other words, the discourse of Niami's film communicates and creates the landscape he favors. Mezirow asserts that discourse is the "specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief" (10). To put Mezirow's statement into the context of the film, then, one can argue that Niami is well aware of the impact of the media on the general public, and his film tries to bring forth the positive side of the Iranian culture.

In the talk, Niami touches upon a number of issues in connection to the casting of actors and actresses, characters, the Iranian community of Los Angeles county, stereotypes, as well as his purpose of producing the film. He says, *Shirin in Love* was "screened both in English and Farsi languages in fifteen cities across America."<sup>180</sup> While the film was "originally produced in English language for the American audiences,"<sup>181</sup> he and his associates later came up with the idea of showing the film also in Farsi, which would eventually attract a larger group of audiences, comprising both mainstream American population and the Iranian community in America. The cast includes Nazanin Boniadi, a famous Iranian-American actress, Maz Jobrani (an Iranian-American stand-up comedian and actor), Max Amini (an Iranian-American stand-up comedian), Anahita Khalatbari, Marshall Manesh, George Wallace (an American stand-up comedian), Riley Smith, and Amy Madigan who are the main actors/actresses along with Black Cats, and Andy and Shani (Iranian-American bands) and also Riley Smith's song.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6hyMsiLJb4> (accessed on June 4, 2015). Translation is mine.

<sup>181</sup> Youtube (see footnote 180).

<sup>182</sup> Niami mentions that Riley Smith is an actor and musician whose song is also used in the film. Youtube (see footnote 180).

In the previous chapter, Maz Jobrani was introduced as a stand-up comedian and actor. However, this film features him as Mike, Shirin's ex-fiancé, who is a plastic surgeon. Another Iranian-American stand-up comedian, Max Amini, also acts as another prosperous Iranian-American surgeon, Ed, in this film. Yet, Nazanin Boniadi is a renowned actress who stars as Shirin in this film: Boniadi appeared in high-profile T.V series in America, such as *General Hospital*, *Homeland*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Ben-Hur*. She also played supporting roles in films, such as *Charlie Wilson's War*, *Iron Man*, and *The Next Three Days*.

Niami mentions that *Shirin in Love* resembles other romantic comedies, such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and that this is the kind of film the ordinary audiences go to have fun and “eat popcorn.”<sup>183</sup> However, he spells out his purpose of producing the film as follows;

We will try to have two separate screenings; English language and Farsi language screenings, which I guess, no film has ever done so... My aim is to present a positive image of the Iranian community in the form of a family production and genre... Nazanin plays the role of a young woman who graduated in law, but wants to be a writer. Her mother (acted by) Anahita Khalatbari, owns a fashion magazine, and her father, acted by Marshall Manesh, is a university professor. Shirin's fiancé, acted by Maz Jobrani, is a plastic surgeon... All I tried to do was to show Iranians as positive people because, as you know, the current image is a negative one, unfortunately.<sup>184</sup>

There is much more to Niami's statement above: By way of cinematography, Niami is able to open up another perspective of Iranian culture to the target audiences, who experience what it is like to live in America from the Iranian community's point of view – a characteristic that also exists in Dumas' previously discussed autobiographies.

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<sup>183</sup> Youtube (see footnote 180).

<sup>184</sup> Youtube (see footnote 180).

Elsewhere in the talk show where Anahita Khalatbari (Shirin's mother) also attends, Niami's repeats his purpose of producing *Shirin in Love*. He says that,

The image of Iranians as shown in American television and cinema is a negative one ... and because of political issues, negative roles, such as terrorists, bad guys, and murderers, always go to Iranian actors and actresses in America ... I thought I would want to make a film... you know, I've been making films in British and American film industries for thirty years, so I thought my film would follow the same technical standards as they are in American films. Meanwhile, I invited the Iranian friends (actors and actresses) to show an Iranian family and all the typical family concerns, like, daughters living at their parents' and the sort of relationships among them, between the daughter and the fiancé and all ... yet I didn't want to show the negativity as being shown everywhere ... I wanted to show an educated, well-to-do and successful family, which is true of many Iranian families here.<sup>185</sup>

Subsequent to Niami's view, Khalatbari adds that "[T]he film shows Iranians in a positive light and its message is that love knows no borders, no matter where you come from or what religion you practice. The message is love, which is expressed in a sweet way."<sup>186</sup>

In addition, Niami tries to make it easy for an American audience to understand what the Iranian community is like. According to Stuart Hall, each culture carries its own "conceptual map," which might not be intelligible to other cultural groups (18). Moreover, "we would be incapable of sharing out thoughts or expressing ideas about the world to each other," meaning "each of us probably does understand and interpret the world in a unique and individual way" (18). Niami makes the Iranian community known to the American audiences by exposing their conceptual map. As Hall asserts, "we are

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<sup>185</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCLOF66aYzU> (accessed on June 1, 2016). Translation is mine. Maz Jobrani, as well, announces the same view on the stage. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmXiltk49Gw> (accessed on November 3, 2015). Therefore, Niami's and Khalatbari's views are also consistent with Jobrani's purpose of stand-up comedy, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>186</sup> Khalatbari uses the Farsi term "shirin," meaning "sweet" in English language. Therefore, she employs a pun in the talk by expressing that the film tells Shirin's life story in a sweet manner. Youtube (see footnote 180).

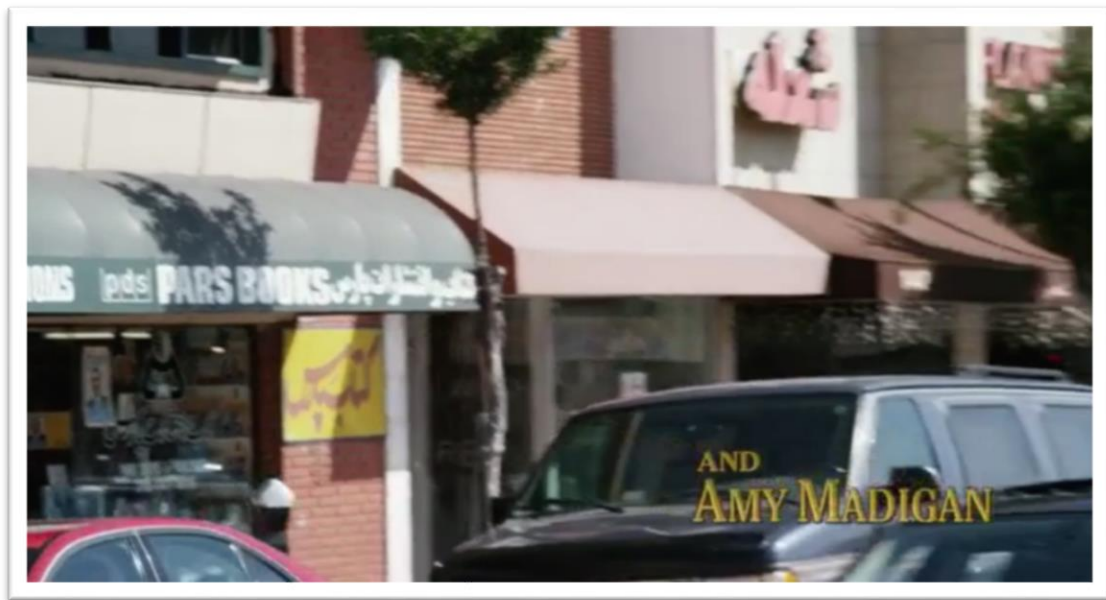
able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways,” insofar as “we say we ‘belong to the same culture’” (18). This is also true of the way *Shirin in Love* depicts both Iranian and American populations by bringing forth both the differences and similarities. The Iranian characters in the film belong to the Iranian diaspora in America, but at the same time they also belong to America as a society that inhabits shared “conceptual maps” of many ethnic cultures in a much broader scale. The role English language plays in establishing ties between Iranian and American characters in the film is also important. The presence of a common language such as English renders the act of communication possible and subsequently facilitates understanding of different conceptual maps. In fact, *Shirin in Love* is a repository of cultural values that represents what it means to be both Iranian and American at the same time, and through its medium of communication lays bare the inaccessible spheres of both cultures.

## 2. Hybridity: The Iranian Community of Los Angeles County



Picture 1: The opening scene in *Shirin in Love* (Shirin driving in her Volkswagen she calls Xoxo)

At the outset of the film, the audiences learn about the business area in Los Angeles County, commonly referred to Tehrangeles by Iranians, where a large community of Iranians have made the area their home. Streets are fraught with Persian signs hanging above a wide array of shops and stores, signifying the presence of Persian community in the area. All these scenes are immediately seen at the beginning of the film, suggesting the hybrid Iranian-American atmosphere of the neighborhood.



Picture 2: Persian signs in the Iranian community of LA



Picture 3: A Persian restaurant in LA

One can see that Iranians and Americans are not represented as being distanced or estranged from each other in the social environment. In fact, the business area indicates how conveniently the Iranian community has blended in with the mainstream population on social and economic levels. Amy Malek's report on the establishment of the Iranian diaspora in America holds true with respect to the existence of the business area of Los Angeles County as shown in the film. By placing Malek's argument in my discussion, I suggest that Iranians' participation in socio-economic structures of America attest to, what Malek calls, their "ethnic legitimacy" (386). In addition, Hamid Naficy's notion of exile is in keeping with Malek's in the way that both put forward the issue of adopting the host society by the Iranian immigrants and turning it into a place where immigrants and exiles may feel at home, whether on a temporary or permanent basis (Naficy 8-9). Both scholars, as well, place emphasis on the question of agency and acceptance of ethnic minority in the recipient society (196-7). However, as with Shirin and her family, Niami's text does not show the Iranian characters going through a feeling of loss or



nostalgia for Iran, which complicates the feeling of being an exile. Naficy discusses the in-between or liminal space of Iranian immigrants in Southern California, yet the Iranian characters in Niami's film think of America as their home, comfortably connecting with the mainstream population of Americans. In fact, there is no scene in the film that reveals any sensation of nostalgia and loss. Shirin and Maryam's presence at a Persian restaurant where they dine among Iranian and American customers can be read in different ways; It is not only the Persian food, Persian kebab and Salad, that may interest the American audience, but also the restaurant itself and ethnically diverse customers that prove ethnic legitimacy of Iranians in America. The Persian restaurant is a part of the entire Persian community of Beverly Hills and its cultural legitimacy is as important as its economic prosperity. Hence, by showing this scene, Niami's film highlights the presence and reception of the Iranian community in America. Finally, Shirin and Maryam mostly communicate in English and the way they dress is aligned with the mainstream culture of America, which signify Nasrin Rahimieh's notion of "transculturality" regarding immigrants (Rahimieh 167).





Picture 4: Maryam and Shirin in the Persian restaurant

Furthermore, Niami's film carries an important message by incorporating the intra-racial marriage of Shirin and William in its text. Despite the political tensions between Iran and America, love knows no boundaries and no political interests. Yet, the wedding itself has other implications: Shirin and William's wedding follows Persian customs in the sense that interior decoration and table setting are arranged in a Persian tradition. Niami even ends the film with a dancing scene and Persian music where the audiences see a flood of ethnic groups celebrating the event together. We also see that Persian culture and tradition do not manifest themselves in a pure way but they come off as being hybrid and in a constant contact with American culture. Neil Lazarus asserts that hybridity in its "idealized liberal view" leads to "a level ground of equality, mutual respect, and open-mindedness," which is what Niami's film similarly advocates (Lazarus 251). The mingling of Persian and American ways of living and intimate relations between Iranians and Americans in the film suggests a shifting social milieu, where co-existence of different ethnic groups is possible.



Picture 5: Maryam's party (The interior space of Shirin's family house)

Bhabha affirms that hybridity carries with it the “necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (Tiffin 9). By the same token, *Shirin in Love* displays no site of racial discrimination in its representation of America. As a matter of fact, the film engages in a poised presentation of Iranian and American cultural sites, in a way that cultural differences and similarities are given expression rather than cultural domination. However, in terms of hybridity and mingling of American and Persian traditions, Nicolas Rapold does not find the film very appealing. He says, Niemi

works to decorate the story with Iranian-American detail (colorful expressions, Persian bands). Yet he can't really sustain a flow. It's the kind of movie that makes you zero in on and root for an actor (Ms. Madigan) as she tries to wring something real out of her lines, but there's no saving this film. <sup>187</sup>

<sup>187</sup> See [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/movies/shirin-in-love-directed-by-ramin-niemi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/movies/shirin-in-love-directed-by-ramin-niemi.html?_r=0) (accessed on March 15, 2016).

Rapold's comments mean that Niami's effort to show the hybrid culture of Iranians in the film may not interest everyone, neither would the use of some Farsi expressions and Iranian music.

### **3. Gender Relations and Social Class Implications: Biased Representations?**

In terms of gender relations, it is highly important to see where the Iranian women in the film stand with respect to their familial, social, and economic status. This will, in turn, show how they are depicted in the film and what possible implications are contained in the concept of gender relations. Arguing that the women of the Middle East are depicted through the Orientalist discourse, Naghibi asks "How do certain representations (in this case, the subjugated Persian woman) become fixed as "truth" despite all evidence to the contrary?" (32) Naghibi closely examines Iranian women's resistance and resilience, and argues that "indigenous Iranian feminism" is the type of feminism that should replace Western feminism's concept of global sisterhood due to the distinctive experiences Iranian women have had through the course of history in Iran. Naghibi reasons that the idea of a global sisterhood contains the concept of "subjugated" Iranian women in its discourse, and maintains that Iran's indigenous feminism complicates concepts such as the "hierarchical organization of heterosexuality" (112). Giving a number of examples from films and documentaries produced by Iranian women, Naghibi asserts that in cinema there is an intimate female friendship and homosociality that defy the domination of male heterosexuality (112, 117). I suggest that Niami's text, as well, goes to exhibit a close female bonding amongst the Iranian women, especially that of Maryam and Shirin. That Shirin works for her mother may attest to a close mother-daughter relationship, that is, a feminine network. Shirin and Maryam's relationship

concerns economic and social positions of both Iranian women and as such can be read beyond the realm of mother-daughter connection. Shirin also forms a close tie with William's mother, which may suggest that bonding amongst Iranian women can extend to the network of non-Iranian women. However, the irony is that it is an Iranian male director and producer who displays a close bond between a mother and her daughter not an Iranian woman writer or artist. By predominantly focusing on Shirin's thoughts and decisions, and by characterizing her as the protagonist, *Shirin in Love* indicates that it is a film about women rather than men, although produced by a man.



Picture 6: Shirin is talking to her mother, Maryam, in her office

The relationship between William's mother and Shirin initially develops on a professional basis. Maryam commissions Shirin to interview a renowned American woman writer, Rachel Harson, who, as Shirin says, "never gets interviews." In this regard,

Maryam's and Rachel's positions find expression against the backdrop of social, economic, and cultural levels.



Picture 7: Rachel Harson, the writer

Rachel Harson is depicted as a mother who has an intimate relationship with her son, William. She also sometimes gives her son advice on how to behave himself.



Picture 8: Rachel and her son, William eating supper

At this point in the film, we realize that William is Harson's son and that Shirin's presence at Harson's may foreshadow a romance in the future. However, in contrast to Harson's down-to-earth manner, we find Maryam very business-minded, especially as she promises Shirin to hold a "beautiful wedding" in return for the interview. Maryam also asks Shirin to write a "classy" article about Harson before she interviews her, which will lure Harson into getting an interview. Hence, the image of Maryam is loaded with charisma and cunning early in the film. By comparison, Rachel Harson is introduced by her hospitality and pleasant demeanor soon after Shirin meets her, while she is still unaware of Harson's identity. Although small, Harson's house is the place Shirin adores. William's room is fraught with many classic works, most of which are written by women writers. Harson says that she "made William read all those books" and that he is "an English teacher." This also implies that William was raised in a house where his mother had a profound influence on every member, especially the fact that William majored in literature.

Early in the film, we see Shirin's arrival at her workplace, a large fashion magazine office owned and managed by her mother, Maryam.



Picture 9: Shirin at her mother's office

The social and economic status of Maryam echoes the film's insistence on the prosperity of the Iranian community in America, which is in contrast to the perception of Iranians as being represented in media.

It is also important to examine how the Iranian women in the film are shown in terms of the practice of wearing the veil (hijab). Elizabeth W. Fernea examines the issue of the veil from the point of view of anthropology and offers new perspectives regarding wearing the veil in different cultures. Fernea contends that the veil is not a challenge when the Muslim woman chooses to wear it. She asserts that the veil is a challenge when women are forced to wear it (1969). Whether or not wearing hijab is optional or imposed, the Iranian women who live inside Iran and participate in the social settings in Iran may have various views with regards to hijab. Ziba Mir-Hosseini views the practice of hijab, arguing

While it undoubtedly restricts some women, it emancipates others by giving them the permission, the very legitimacy for their presence in the public domain which has always been male-dominated in Iran. Many women today owe their jobs, their economic autonomy, their public persona, to compulsory hijab. There are women who have found in hijab a sense of worth, a moral high ground, especially those who could never fare well in certain elitist and Westernised sections of pre-revolutionary Iran. (156)

Taking Fernea's premise into account, I surmise that the practice of hijab amongst the Iranian women of the film is shown as a matter of choice rather than obligation, which highly echoes the culture of the family the women come from. In fact, Niami's film implements the concepts of the private and public spheres to a large degree. It means that by bringing the private and public spheres together, Niami's text shows to what extent the Iranian women characters are restricted or free in their homes and workplaces. As a result, I suggest that Shirin and Maryam are neither constrained in their private sphere nor they are prevented from participating in the public sphere. The message Niami's text tries to communicate is that Iranian women's free participation in familial and social roles indicates that they do not suffer from traditional patriarchy at home.

Haddad and Findly categorize the practice of wearing hijab by Muslim women in a number of areas, including

Religious (an act of obedience to the will of God as a consequence of a profound religious experience which several women referred to as being 'born again'); Psychological (an affirmation of authenticity, a return to the roots and a rejection of western norms 'a sense of peace'); Political (a sign of disenchantment with the prevailing political order); Revolutionary (an identification with the Islamic revolutionary forces that affirm the necessity of the Islamization of society); Economic (a sign of affluence, of being a lady of leisure); Cultural (a public affirmation of allegiance to chastity and modesty); Demographic (a sign of being urbanized); Practical (a means of reducing the amount to be spent on clothing); or Domestic (a way to keep the peace, since the males in the family insist on it). (294)

Therefore, Niami's text defies "religious," "cultural" and "domestic" categories above when re-inventing a new identity for the Iranian women in America. However, a



religious Muslim reader may contend that Niami's text opposes the religious and cultural practices of the veil by blatantly unveiling the body of Muslim women and undermining their chastity, and as such the film re-presents an unconventional image of Muslim women in America. In terms of the representation of women, therefore, I would argue that the film engages in a kind of unveiling. For example, there is a scene where Shirin is in a bikini and hosts Mike and other friends by a swimming pool. One may argue that Niami's text propagates the discourse of Western feminism by showing Shirin's naked body as she walks around and serves beer for her fiancé and others. This scene in the film may also be read as being addressed to Muslim women by suggesting that an Iranian-American is free to dress and go around the way pleases her, while a Muslim woman outside of America is restricted to do so.



Picture 10: Nudity (Shirin)

In other words, Niami's film is opposed to the traditional and religious practice of the veil in the sense that Shirin and Maryam do not wear the veil or headscarf and, instead, dress the way they favor. It is then worth noting the implications hijab has in a

Muslim family and culture. In this regard, Ramin Niami's text can, on the one hand, be critiqued for aligning itself with the colonialist agenda, which portrays unveiled women as being educated and modern. This mode of representing the Third World women is practiced by Western feminist and colonialist scholars who, as Chandra Mohanty investigates, reduce the practice of veiling to concepts such as "control" and "backwardness" (56). Mohanty harshly criticizes "Western feminism" for depicting the "average" Third World woman caught up in an "essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (56). Western feminist approach is, therefore, questioned for the implementation of the binary opposition of oppression/liberation that is attributed to the act of veiling in Muslim communities.

On the other hand, Niami's film has strengthened the position of Iranian women when they and their American counterparts appear together in their workplaces and social milieu. Niami's film has been very strategically planned in the way that it presents two Iranian women, Maryam and Shirin, at the top of the cast. Therefore, it is important to note where the Iranian women stand on social, economic, and familial levels. That is, women's positional superiority or inferiority defines as to whether they are centered or marginalized. As Leela Gandhi describes, "Feminist aim has been to enable women to become the active participating subjects rather than the passive and reified object of knowledge" (44). Hence, by allowing the Iranian women to partake in the core social and economic structures, Niami has distanced himself from controversies such as marginalization and oppression of Iranian women, but, more importantly, has acted as a

revisionist by conferring agency upon them. For instance, Maryam's social position is more firmly established and asserted than that of her husband. Shirin's authoritative decision to cancel her marriage with an Iranian-American plastic surgeon, Mike, and marry William implies that she enjoys this agency. Even though Shirin felt compelled to marry Mike because her mother "love [d] Mike," she also takes advantage of the agency to oppose her mother, who is depicted as being a wishful woman. Judith Butler concedes that agency springs from a hegemonic discourse (xx). Hence, Niami may assume the role of a revisionist, and by centering Iranian women in his text attempts to assert their agency. A germane point to the analysis above is the concept of the private and public spheres, which Niami's film implements to a large degree. By bringing the private and public spheres together, Niami's text shows to what extent the Iranian women characters are restricted or free in their homes and workplaces. However, Shirin and Maryam are neither constrained in their private sphere nor are they prevented from participating in the public sphere. The message Niami's text tries to communicate is that Iranian women's free participation in familial and social roles indicates that they do not suffer from traditional patriarchy at home. Yet, an Iranian woman living in Iran may have a different view regarding wearing hijab from the other Iranian woman who also lives in the country.

One may critique Niami's film for exhibiting the gender relations and social classes selectively, which may not hold true of the Iranian community of Los Angeles. In this way, by incorporating characters such as Shirin, Maryam, Mike, Ed, who come from the upper Middle class, Niami's text generates subjects the way he wants to exist and act. As Hall affirms,

It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge (...) [S]ubjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the episteme, the discursive formation, the regime of truth, of a particular period and culture. (...) the 'subject' is produced within discourse. (55)

Linda Hutcheon's notion of the "aggregative" function of irony, which is concerned with the inclusionary and exclusionary practices holds true in this context (*Irony's Edge* 48-55). Hutcheon relates the aggregative to the practice of dominant discourses that allow for the existence of a reduced set of meanings. Hence, by ascribing certain images to the Iranian community in Los Angeles, Niami attempts to construct a new language regarding the subjects in his film. In this regard, it is Niami who decides what images his text should include and/or exclude. As Foucault says, "nothing has any meaning outside of discourse," and, therefore, Maryam, Shirin, Vickie, Mike, and Ed are subjects that are created within Niami's discourse (1972, 32).

As to the strong network of female characters, the same is true of Maryam-Shirin relationship, but in a different sense: Despite the fact that Shirin works for Maryam, she does not enjoy her career. Shirin reveals to Rachel in a conversation that she "is a coward," probably because she is working for her mother. In fact, it is after Shirin comes to Harson's house that we understand Shirin has a lot more in common with Harson's family than she has with hers. Even Harson's humble house and the pristine rustic environment where they live appeal much more to Shirin than her family's large mansion in the city.



Picture 11: Shirin's large family house



Picture 12: The maritime town where Harson family lives. William stays in the lighthouse.

The sharp contrast of the two images in terms of family structure and social/natural milieu may suggest that Harson's family is where Shirin belongs. Maryam, Shirin and Rachel are shown as influential women on familial and social levels. However, there are

minor female roles such as William's ex-girlfriend whose inappropriate and embarrassing behavior in public makes her stand as an unfavorable character, or Vickie who briefly shows up in a couple of scenes. Shirin is first scared to tell Maryam about her feelings for William, but she finally gets the courage to confront her. Shirin also goes on to tell Maryam that she wants to live on her own and get a new job. Therefore, despite the fact that the film does not show any Iranian women being silenced by any Iranian men, we may understand that Shirin has been silenced by the patriarchy that arises from Maryam's positional superiority, socially and economically.

The male characters in the film also play important roles: Nader, Shirin's father, is represented as a calm, sophisticated man whose wise and kind behavior opposes any image of a patriarch. Nader lives in a matriarchal family and is rather a marginalized figure. Mike, Shirin's ex-fiancé, who is a plastic surgeon, is represented as a kind and caring man with a good sense of humor. He feels disappointed after he learns that Shirin has fallen in love with another man, but later he accepts the fact that Shirin's feelings matter most in her life, hence he is depicted as an understanding person. Therefore, these two Iranian men sharply contrast the patriarchal image of an Iranian man, as shown in *Not without My Daughter* (1991), for example. William is also represented as a calm and wise man who loves Shirin and highly considers her feelings. When in Harson's house, Shirin tries a meatloaf dish and asks Rachel Harson for the recipe. Rachel replies, "I just put it together. It's his (William's) recipe. He is the chef." Then, Shirin remarks, "Oh, you know. My father is the chef in our house, too." This simple exchange of comments shows that both William and Nader do not characterize patriarchal figures. Rachel seems to have liked Shirin as she compliments her son in a scene after William leaves home, "He is so good-looking," suggesting to Shirin that she might

want to date William. Therefore, Rachel herself in a humorous undertone reveals that Shirin and William may make a good couple. Elsewhere, in another funny attempt to make them get to know each other better, Rachel insists that William “take Shirin out for a lovely drive... and show her the beauty of the landscape,” which Shirin first refuses but later accepts after Rachel keeps insisting. From this point onward, Shirin and William’s relationship initiates and a whirlwind romance sparks between them, although they stop their affair for a short period of time due to Shirin’s commitment to her fiancé, Mike. She also needs some time to think more seriously about her life and her decision as to whether she really wants to marry Mike or William. The audiences also learn about William’s selfless and altruistic character after Rachel reveals to Shirin facts about their family. She says,

When the weather is really, really stormy, he (William) listens to the radio in case somebody needs help... His father (William’s father) died twelve years ago in a horrible storm. The coastguard couldn’t pick up the signal because it was too weak. And, William left New York, moved back here with a whole bunch of high-tech radio equipment. And, he sits there, and he listens to the radio, and he can listen even the weakest signal.

Thus, Niami creates a character such as William through the words of his mother, Rachel, on the one hand, and through the depiction of William in other scenes in the film, on the other. It is at the end of Rachel’s revealing story of her life that Maryam calls Shirin and asks her to interview Rachel. Maryam also tells Shirin, “Make sure you get some pictures.” Characters such as Maryam and Rachel are portrayed in a stark contrast: The juxtaposition of Rachel’s calm personality and Maryam’s opportunistic trait sparks a humorous undertone exactly when Maryam’s telephone call almost cuts off Rachel’s conversation. With such an untimely presence, Maryam also spoils the entire ambiance of Rachel’s story-telling. Even Shirin smiles after she hangs up the phone, which is indicative of ludicrousness in Maryam’s request. In the interview I included, Niami states

that he “characterized Maryam as the antagonist and the bad person of the film,”<sup>188</sup> but such a characterization only adds more humor to the plot and encourages the audiences to think more about Maryam’s role in the film. As Anahita Khalatbari says, “Maryam is the kind of Iranian mother who does everything for her daughter, so she would be happy ... She also wants her daughter to marry a doctor.”<sup>189</sup> Hence, Niami shows the commonalities that might exist in Iranian culture and other cultures, despite Maryam’s apparent callousness. Maryam’s opportunism is also shown when she asks her daughter to get “an exclusive” with Rachel’s son after Rachel’s death. After Shirin tells her that “it’s a private funeral... No camera, no television, nothing,” Maryam proceeds again to urge Shirin by asking her to take a small camera hidden in a hair clip to the funeral. Shirin is saddened by her mother’s behavior, although there is some bitter humor in the way Maryam acts every time she plans to earn something.

In another scene, confused and sad, Shirin asks her father, Nader, to tell her why he married Maryam. The unheard truth is that Maryam married Nader, a college professor in Iran at the time, only out of taking a revenge on her fiancé who had abandoned her at the time and married another woman. Maryam was “rich and smart,” as Nader admits, and she had asked Nader to marry her. Finally, Shirin gets the courage to tell her mother that she is in love with William, and that she does not want to marry Mike. Maryam gets angry and tells her that she “has lost her mind.” Meanwhile, William turns up at Maryam’s office out of the blue, coming forward to tell Shirin about his feelings for her. Finding out about William’s presence in her office, Maryam invites him to lunch before

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<sup>188</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCLOF66aYzU> (accessed on June 1, 2016). Translation is mine.

<sup>189</sup> See previous footnote.



he could ever get to meet Shirin. The pinnacle of Maryam's opportunism occurs at lunch in the Persian restaurant where Maryam lies to William that Shirin had married Mike in "Las Vegas" some while ago. At the restaurant, Maryam also lies to William that Shirin had told her everything. The mystery of the film unravels when we understand that William had been publishing novels under his mother's name, using her name as a credit. He misunderstands Maryam and tells her the secret only he and Shirin knew. Maryam publishes the story she was looking for a while, and William regrets trusting Shirin assuming that she had betrayed him. Shirin tries to reach out to William and explain to him everything, but William does not answer her calls. Disparate and helpless, Shirin finally agrees to marry Mike, but in the last minute Marvin who is attending the wedding in his uniform intervenes and declares that Shirin is under arrest for all the traffic offenses she has previously committed. Shirin leaves the ceremony in her wedding dress and drives in her xoxo Volkswagen to the lighthouse where William is staying. It is Shirin who proposes William, telling him, "I'm gonna say what you were supposed to say to me. I love you. Will you marry me?"

The film ends with the Shirin and William's wedding where there is a huge crowd of international guests (White, Brown, and Black ethnicities altogether).



Picture 13: The wedding and ethnically diverse guests.

There is a famous Iranian-Armenian singer and his American wife (Andy and Shani) who perform a Persian song for the crowd.



Picture 14: Andy and Shani (the Armenian-Iranian singer and his American wife) playing live music at the wedding

Mike, who is now Shirin's ex-fiancé is shown arm in arm with Vickie, who was supposed to befriend Ed. Everyone is dancing happily and celebrating the occasion. Niami not only depicts both genders together in his representation of cultures, regardless of their nationalities, but he also positions women, whether Iranian or American, alongside other male characters. In such a balanced representation of genders in both cultures, *Shirin in Love* brings to the American audiences an image of Iranian men and women that is in conflict to that depicted in the media. The film attempts to contradict American media's biased images and stereotypes regarding gender roles and cultural values of Iranian community. Foucault (1973) describes episteme as follows, "[...] in any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice" (168). Therefore, Niami's film is a "silent" practice, in the sense that it does not put forth "a theory" directly, but lays down its episteme. In other words, *Shirin's* episteme is the "apparatus," to use Foucault's term, that presents its version of truth, regardless of being true or false, through Niami's cinematic project (1980, 197). Using Foucault's guiding notion of "truth," I suggest that through words and images, the film attempts to generate its own "regime of truth" about the Iranian community and women in America in "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" (*Truth and Power* 133).

In terms of the representation of social class, Niami's film depicts Iranian characters that merely belong to upper Middle class families who are well-established in

America, economically and socially; Shirin's mother owns a successful fashion magazine and her father is a retired college professor; Shirin's ex-fiancé is a prosperous plastic surgeon and all other Iranian characters are affluent individuals. Almost all Iranian characters dress up in stylish attire and are native English speakers, indicating they were either born or raised in America. This is also indicative of the length of time Iranians have been living in America, and also alludes to the number of Iranian-American generations; Women in the film, especially Iranians, are powerful figures who can freely make decisions, which resists vigorously the patriarchal imaginary of the Orient. Thus, the Iranian women own "parole and reprieve" and Niami's narrative opposes that of "hostage narratives" (Milani 130). However, regardless of Niami's effort in representing a selected community of Iranians in Los Angeles, one can see the film lacks other social classes of the Iranian community. The absence of working class Iranians may count as a notable shortcoming of Niami's text. This can also testify to Niami's use of a discreet and selective language which includes certain people in the text while discards others.

As to the act of representation, Amy Malek puts forth that the Iranian community in America did not allow "others as visitors" to represent their culture, and that they have been actively participating in ethnic festivals to "highlight their cultural values and mark their diaspora communities as legitimate and productive members of American society" (409). This is true of the way Niami represents the Iranian community of Los Angeles. Yet, Niami builds a representational system that speaks for the upper Middle-class Iranian diaspora in America. In other words, Niami only shows a screened image of well-to-do social class of Iranian families while there is no mention of working classes in the film. This notable absence of any other Iranian social classes attests to the one-directional

nature of representing the Iranian community in Los Angeles county. Taking Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and heteroglossia into account, I suggest that Niami's text suffers from a major downside, which is the absence of other social classes of the Iranian community in Los Angeles. With reference to Niami's opinion in the interview where he mentioned his purpose as being the mere representation of upper Middle class Iranians, one can see that Niami's text carries a one-directional and unitary language. Therefore, voices in the film can be associated to Bakhtin's concept of "centripetal forces," which are in keeping with the presence of dominant and unifying ideologies in a literary body (*The Dialogic Imagination* 271). The dialogue between Iranians and Americans may indicate that Niami's text also attempts to bring multifarious voices that emanate from Iranian and American cultures. Yet, from within the Iranian community, there is a conspicuous absence of voices coming from Middle class and lower Middle class families. The irony is that despite Niami's effort to present an unbiased image of the whole Iranian community of Los Angeles County, one can see a narrow picture of the diasporic community and, therefore, Niami's representation of the Persian culture and the Iranian community of Southern California does not entail a neutral tone.

## **II. Humor in the Film: Critical Aspects**

In general, *Shirin in Love* attempts to represent the Iranian culture disguised in an ironic language and humor: The film uses humor to show serious events in a less serious language and encounter. Ziv (1984) puts forth that humor can act as a defense mechanism when someone laughs at the self to deter antagonism and belligerence. Niami's film generates laughter through Mike's funny gestures, Maryam's frivolous remarks, and Shirin's sloppiness, which put a smile on the American audiences' faces.

Thus, the film manages to avert aggression that could otherwise be directed at Iranians. Miczo (2004) argues that by trying to ward off anxiety, humor is able to form a sense of security and provide support from the other. The film provides the audiences with insight into the culture of Iranians and the movie theaters is a place where both Iranians and Americans sit next to each other, watch the film, and laugh together (Jobrani and Niami both acknowledge this point in the interview). In other words, humor in the film may engender a sense of security amongst the American audiences when they realize that they have much in common with Iranians.

Humor in the text also forms counter-discourses, not any social change in particular, that attempt to dismantle negativities against Middle Easterners and Muslims and eventually attempt to raise public awareness. Subsequently, understanding and respecting minorities are predicated upon the promoted public awareness in America. In 2009, President Barak Obama stressed the importance of common dialogue, mutual understanding and respect for Americans with all their differences in race and ethnicity. Obama said that, “In order to move forward, we must say openly the things we hold in our hearts, and that too often are said only behind closed doors. There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground.”<sup>190</sup> Obama clearly points to the exit from the current problems such as disputed inequalities and injustices facing Americans, and calls for an inclusive participation of all ethnic minorities in America.

Niami communicates his messages through humor and film. In this regard, humor in Niami’s film serves as a

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<sup>190</sup> Barak Obama’s speech on June 4, 2009. [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) (retrieved on February 2, 2016).

useful vehicle for communicating certain messages and dealing with situations that would be more difficult to handle using a more serious, unambiguous mode of communication. The multiple interpersonal functions of humor suggest that it may be viewed as a type of social skill or interpersonal competence. (Martin 150)

Hence, by way of “communicating,” humor boosts the social relations among diverse ethnic groups that live within the same society. To put Martin’s view in my analysis, it is not communication that matters only, but the artists also respond to ideologies within their society and as such reinforce critical thinking in an artwork. By doing so, Niami challenges prevalent and dominant ideologies, which in Brookfield’s view consist of our “values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appear self-evidently true and morally desirable” (129).

It is also worthy of note that Niami opens the film with humor, maintains it, and ends the film with the happy scene of the wedding. There is no doubt that the characters and situations contribute to the generation of humor in the film. However, the question is, “Does Niami’s film persuade the American audiences to change their perspectives towards Iranians?” Niami’s views in both the interview and the talk show deal with the use of cinema in spreading a different image of Iranians and Iranian culture from that in the American media. Hence, one can argue that the film’s humor may strive to persuade the audiences to believe something that opposes their common understanding and imagination. To take humor as a tool for persuasion, one should place emphasis on the communicative role of humor and the promotion of objectivity. Grimes (1955) asserts that humor creates objectivity of mind, which is central to persuasion. However, Markiewicz (1974) raises doubts about the effectiveness of persuasion and humor, and dismisses the persuasiveness of humor. In the same fashion, Niami’s film does not persuade the audiences to come to believe in a new ideology, but it rather opens up a new

perspective or, simply, constructs its own knowledge about Iranians who live among many other ethnic groups in America. In this regard, Niami's film does not definitively follow a strict agenda of persuasion that encourages the audiences to change their imaginary regarding Iranians. Furthermore, by depicting Iranians and Americans socializing and communicating, *Shirin in Love* does the task of establishing human relationships. Meyer concedes that the need for communication has made humor a useful tool in "establishing and affecting human relationships" (58). Previously, I discussed Dumas's view of humor when she mentions the phrase "shared humanity" for the instructive and constructive roles of humor in promoting human's understanding and relationships.<sup>191</sup> However, I suggest that we cannot definitively claim that humor can raise the readers' consciousness while we can argue that humor, and irony in particular, can open up new perspectives and encourage the readers to look at other possible ways of understanding the things and communicating the messages. Niami's text shows close relationships between Iranians and Americans and invites the audiences to look into domestic and public spheres of the Iranian community. In showing the private spaces, Niami's text also brings forth various aspects of the Persian culture, their food, their music, their traditions, to name just a few, and goes to encourage the audiences to understand the Iranian culture of Los Angeles County. Shirin's encounter with officer Henderson for a couple of times, and her use of humor to get away from getting traffic tickets; Shirin's inviting officer Henderson to her wedding; Maryam's American staff and their presence at her place for the party and wedding; and, Shirin's Marrying William at the end of the film suggest the effective role of humor in forming human relationships

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<sup>191</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbRryxJ\\_vu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbRryxJ_vu8) (accessed on July 25, 2016).



between the Iranian and American characters. Amidst such relationship, the audiences may also learn about the Persian culture, especially the way Iranians marry, the influential and sometimes annoying roles Iranian parents play in the face of their children's important decision, as well as other aspects regarding American and Iranian lifestyles. The humorous language of the film also makes the Iranian characters of the film known to the audiences; Maryam's childish behavior, Ed's sexual comments about the girls he meets, and Mike's funny personality add flavor to the levity of the film. With respect to humor's role in human relationship, the audiences can find how humor affects the chain of events in the film and how it was incorporated in the text of the film early on. At Maryam's party, for example, which was held for her office's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, she invites a large group of people to her house. The party is supposed to be a serious event, but after Shirin drinks and gets intoxicated, the events takes a humorous turn. William is also amongst the guests at Maryam's party and sees Shirin for the first time. This scene is followed by another scene where William finds Shirin drunk, dancing under the rain outside her mother's mansion. He drives Shirin to a room in a motel in town, changes Shirin's soaked dress, and leaves her alone in the room. After Mike learns about the event, he suspects Shirin has cheated on him, but the only comment he makes is, "My fiancé is in somebody's bed. Oh, my God, I'm going dizzy." Mike is not shown an over-protective Iranian man who might avenge Mike, but he is shown as a calm and funny man who eventually agrees that Shirin should eventually decide about her life.

Implied meanings occur through humor in the film: Mike's portrayal is opposed to the image of the Iranian man who never laughs and is angry. In the interview I included in the chapter, Niemi mentions that he uses both Iranian and American characters and

attempts to produce a positive image of Iranians. Humor in the film, then, can complicate stereotypical and mediated images of Muslims and Middle Easterners, while it also affects the relationship amongst ethnic groups. As to dialogism and heteroglossia in the film, then, *Shirin in Love* converge voices from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and shows them in a constant dialogue. Shirin's marrying William can be taken as a metaphor for the Iran-America relations. In other words, Niami constructs the metaphor, alluding that the same thing may also happen on the political level. One can say that Niami rests his film on the social level, yet his film carries an ironic undertone directed at the political level.

### **III. Conclusion**

By dissecting the discourse of *Shirin in Love*, I have proposed that Niami's text is loaded with critical themes and notions such as the diasporic culture of the Iranian community in America, gender and class relations, and hybridity. These themes are conveyed under humorous and ironic gestures. However, the importance of the position of an artist such as Niami becomes clear when his text implicitly encourages the audiences to question prevalent presuppositions and assumptions about Iranians in America. As Brookfield concedes, "We need others to serve as critical mirrors who highlight our assumptions for us and reflect them back to us in unfamiliar, surprising and disturbing ways" (146-7). In this regard, Niami acts as "critical mirrors," which lead us to rethink our perceptions of the world around us and redefine our attitudes.

My contention is that through humor, the film attempts to promote American audiences' understanding about the cultural values and practices of the Iranian community in Los Angeles. The film also shows Iranians and Americans communicating

and living together, despite the political gap between the two nations that has been left bare since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. *Shirin in Love*'s text represents the Iranian culture, albeit hybrid and imbued in humor, in an ironic undertone to viewers. Levels of interpretation regarding socio-cultural circumstances of the Iranian and American characters unfold as the viewers delve into implied and inclusive meanings of the text. As Foucault asserts, discourse "constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge" (Hall 44). Given Foucault's notion of discourse,<sup>192</sup> Niami's text shows how Iranians act, talk, and conduct themselves. To use Eagleton's view of language, the narrative of *Shirin in Love* is comprised of certain rules that regulate "what can and must be said from a certain position within social life; and expressions have meaning only by virtue of the discursive formations within which they occur" (Eagleton, 195). In other words, Niami's *Shirin* constructs its own type of knowledge about the Iranian community by capturing images and words in a cinematic production. In this regard, the film shapes its own language, which should be read as a social configuration that produces knowledge about Iranians, in general, and the Iranian community of Los Angeles Country, in particular.

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<sup>192</sup> In *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1972), Foucault argues that anything outside discourse is not acceptable and that things become meaningful in their interaction with discourse, either in agreement with or in conflict to discursive formations.

**CONCLUSION: Respect for the Other through Dialogism**

In this dissertation, I have sifted through the possibilities of understanding Dumas's, Jobrani's, and Niami's works by unraveling their discourses in light of rhetorical tropes, techniques, and notions such as irony, parody, the carnivalesque, and dialogism. I have identified the ironic inferences in hidden, inter-related, and differentiated clusters of meaning that can be obtained under the veneer of humor and beyond the formal attributes of the scripts. Given the era in which the works were released, I have also included the purpose of the Iranian-American artists: I have argued that the works were produced following 9/11 in order to help develop the awareness of American audiences about the Iranian diaspora in America, in general, in an attempt to rectify the image of Iranians as represented in American media, in particular. Yet, one should note that all the works first emerged in America, and were released to the American audiences. Therefore, Americans, including Iranian-Americans, are the original or target audience exposed to the works. Moreover, each genre presents an individual perspective towards the Iranian culture in America: Along the lines of cultural representations,<sup>193</sup> Firoozeh Dumas's memoirs portray a typical Iranian immigrant family against the backdrops of pre- and post-Iranian Revolution's landscapes in America. Maz Jobrani's stand-up comedy dwells primarily upon themes such as racial discrimination, stereotyping, and injustice exercised against a wide gamut of minorities, such as South and Central Asians, Middle Easterners, and Latin Americans in America. The *Axis*, though, specifically tries to challenge the negativities deployed against Muslims, Middle Easterners, and Iranians. Ramin Niami's

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<sup>193</sup> My conjecture is that Dumas's memoirs deploy both the Iranian and American cultural practices, yet they expose shades of differences and commonalities between the two.

film benefits from strategies that converge cultural representations and discursive practices in centering the Iranian community of Los Angeles county in his filmic production.

Despite all the afore-mentioned aspects, I surmise that the artworks also help with the emergence of a dialogic space where individuals coming from a variety of ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds can openly and freely communicate. Humor and art as such can serve as a socio-cultural and linguistic tool that affects the achievement of mutual dialogue and respect amongst nations. In the same vein, we see the Iranian community of the film in a constant interaction with Americans. Both Dumas and Niami show the ethnically diverse characters that engage in communication throughout their artefacts. Jobrani's language may also provoke the minds of the audiences and encourage them to compare and contrast the subjects the stand-up comedian enunciates on the stage. The subjects Jobrani gives expression to are the voices of Muslims, non-Muslims, diverse ethnic groups and minorities, the oppressed, and the members of the dominant citizenry, such as the white population and authorities. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin asserts that in a dialogue, "a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with the whole body and deeds" (293). Bakhtin's definition of dialogue encourages us to envisage a person in his or her social life. Yet, the question is, "What does the audience experience in a dialogue that is put forward by the author?" Melanie Green discusses that such experiences create "transportation" in which the audience "consciously or unconsciously pushes real world facts aside and instead engages the narrative world created by the author" (248). To put it in Linda Hutcheon's terms, it is the aggregative function of irony that gives primacy to

the role of the author or artist in presenting to the audiences the intended imagination and/or perception. In the artefacts under my study, one may not find the mediated imaginary or stereotypical image of Muslims, and is invited to experience the world created or constructed by the artist. Green's viewpoint is consistent with Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic, which amasses both one-directional and multi-directional voices in a text into heteroglossia, thus forming dialogized heteroglossia or dialogic justice. Bakhtin's heteroglossia, primarily used for the novel but later applied to almost all genres, organizes the literary work into "a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author" (1981: 300). The author's voice pervades the literary work, and is not separated from the lexicons or convictions of a particular character. The characters are disguised with dialogues, personalities, ideas, and words. As Bakhtin wrote, the voices that act toward a single idea are referred to as centripetal or a single language (monologic), while the voices that act toward multiple ideas are referred to as centrifugal (dialogic) (270). Hence, in a literary work, heteroglossia refers to the conglomeration and interaction of stratified voices that can be perceived as centripetal or centrifugal forces. I assume the Iranians' voices in the works for the centrifugal, while the dominant discourse—whether Iranians' or Americans' ideologies along with common beliefs spread by state-run American media—for the centripetal. To be specific, we see Iranian voices alongside those of Americans' in a dialogic interaction. They not only challenge each other, but also challenge in-group ideologies and perceptions: Dumas challenges both Iranian and American cultural values; Jobrani projects the clash of the centripetal and the centrifugal by questioning and complicating the common beliefs in America on the stage, and Niami basically titillates

Americans' imagination of Iranians as constructed in American media. In all the works under my analysis, the practices of stereotyping, racism, discrimination and injustice account for the unitary, one-directional or centripetal forces that are published in the media, while the Iranian artists construct the opposing imaginary or centrifugal forces through the creation of characters or situations. Regarding the voices in the novel, Bakhtin argues,

The social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its form, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expressed the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author. (300)

To put it another way, the display of differing voices within their social framework may act concertedly to deflect and reconstruct the authorial voice or position. However, we cannot surely argue that the Iranian artists' positions remain stable throughout their artworks because authorial stances also come into conflict with the characters' and the audiences' voices.<sup>194</sup> In fact, this is the liberal function of heteroglossia that allows for a space in which dominant and opposing discourses can exist together, yet constantly contradict each other. Bakhtin also discusses that structural elements, such as form and content, disseminate from the social contexts of the voices (261). The idea of "social contexts of the voices" is in keeping with Hutcheon's notion of the social "circumstances" and "scenes" that contribute to the ironic communications in the text (1994; 94, 4).

In *A Civil Tongue* (1995), Mark Kingwell expounds his views on the heterogeneity of positions that can be held by several members participating in a dialogue. Kingwell's

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<sup>194</sup> This might also be akin to the aggregative function of irony, as put forward by Hutcheon, where inclusionary and exclusionary practices are applied to the text (*Irony's Edge* 54-5).

approach is informed by ‘civility’ as a precondition for the establishment of justice and commitment in a society. What Kingwell proposes is “justice as civility,” which deals with sociolinguistic grounds and renders a new model for the theory of dialogic justice (193).<sup>195</sup> However, Kingwell’s premise rests upon moral principles and etiquettes. The works under my analysis can also be read with respect to Kingwell’s “justice as civility,” where the dialogic means a democratic space or an opportunity for the voices to interact. This mode of thinking is yet an alternative perspective amongst many other possibilities. Nonetheless, my question is, “Can dialogism bring about any social change(s) in a multicultural society?” My argument is that it is not the external agents that can cause modernization and partake in the development of humans but it is humans themselves who should intend to accept opposing ideas in the face of social challenges. In simpler terms, the inclination to accepting and respecting the Other’s opinion(s) may bring us to the realization that the Other and/or minor groups<sup>196</sup> also participate in a society. Similarly, by bringing to the fore the Iranian diaspora and representing the community, Dumas, Jobrani and Niami may reinforce the recognition of the Iranian community as one of the many ethnic or minor categories in America. In other words, the works aim to promote the agency of Iranian ethnicity and amplify the Iranian culture across various groups of audience. As a result, the communications that occur in the life writing, stand-up comedy and film can inspire the American audiences to understand and respect the Other. More importantly, the reader/interpreter/viewer is not required to participate in the

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<sup>195</sup> Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987, 1989 [1962], 1992, 1996) offers models of the dialogic that unpack the rudiments of justice as a collective and cooperative venture, which can be attained through social conversations of citizens.

<sup>196</sup> I assume the marginalized ethnic categories, genders, social classes and the oppressed for the Other or minor participants in my thesis.



act of reading, but he or she is rather invited to observe and understand the cultural manifestations embedded in the discourses of the artefacts. The fact that the target audiences may come to understand the Iranian culture through the lens of the members of the diaspora may suggest that the Iranian community can speak for its members. However, one should note that not all the representations performed by the members of the diasporas are correct and acceptable. There are always controversies regarding the representation of a nation, whether by outsiders or the members of the very community. Therefore, it is safe to argue that the Iranian-American artists themselves took the responsibility of articulating their community's cultural values and practices. In other words, their works suggest that it is not Americans who are licensed to speak for Iranians.

Foss and Griffin examine the discourse of the dialogic in what they consider a contrast between invitational and persuasive rhetoric. They argue that while persuasion is concerned with desire for control and domination, invitation is related to offering alternatives or possibilities. They argue,

Although we believe that persuasion is often necessary, we believe an alternative exists when changing and controlling others is not the rhetor's goal; we call this rhetoric invitational rhetoric...Invitational rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value and self-determination. (3)

This means that the type of communication and dialogism that occurs in a text allows for the existence of varied perspectives other than mere social influence, which leads to persuasion. Therefore, Foss and Griffin exclude one of the main objectives of communication, which is the influence on the Other. However, they include the perspectives that promote agency of the Other. When everyone is invited to understand

the Other, paternalistic notions and positional superiority have no room to act, and as such it is the guiding notion of the collective and the democratic that promotes the idea of respect for the Other. Foss and Griffin assert,

The act of changing others not only establishes the power of the rhetor over others but also devalues the lives and perspectives of those others. The belief systems and behaviors others have created for living in the world are considered by rhetors to be inadequate or inappropriate and thus in need of change. (3)

My argument, however, differs to some extent from Foss and Griffin's because the artefacts in my dissertation do not merely and simply invite the readers and/or audiences to understand the Other, but they go further by inviting the readers and/or audiences to experience or empathize how the Other, that is, Iranians, feel about being immigrants in America and how they act in the face of different situations. Martha Nussbaum uses the term "narrative imagination" instead, which is akin to the "invitational rhetoric" put forth by Foss and Griffin. By the "narrative imagination," Nussbaum means,

the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. (390)

Thus, my contention does not hinge on the "invitational rhetoric" only, but it also looks at Nussbaum's. In this regard, the American audiences can put themselves in the "shoes" of Iranians and understand what it is like to be an Iranian in America. On the one hand, I argue that the term "intelligent reader" is allied with the act of reading, which is performed on the part of the interpreter. It is the interpreter who identifies ironic inferences in the text and makes it possible for the irony to occur. On the other hand, it is Nussbaum's idea of the "narrative imagination" alongside Foss and Griffin's "invitational rhetoric" that work concertedly in inviting the reader to understand the Other or to understand the "emotions and wishes and desires" of a character in the story.

By representing the Iranian community, the works also entertain the audiences: The works may gravitate the American audiences to the humorous situations and provide the audiences with an alternative perception about the Iranian diaspora. It means that their texts employ the “invitational rhetoric” and “narrative imagination” at the same time, which may subsequently lead to the raising of American audiences’ consciousness regarding the Iranian diaspora in America. As to Dumas’s memoirs, the protagonist or the author depicts the cultural and social challenges facing her in America before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and thus creates a form of rhetoric that invites the readers to observe and feel what it was like to be an Iranian at the time. On the one hand, serious matters such as the Hostage Crisis,<sup>197</sup> discriminatory practices against Iranians, Americans’ view of Iranians, and, on the other hand, the humorous adventures of Dumas’s immediate family as the new-comers in America—all the funny blunders in the domestic and public spaces—allow for both invitation and entertainment. The “narrative imagination” of the “intelligent reader,” to put it in Nussbaum’s terms, familiarizes the American readers to the Iranian culture and inspires the American audiences to perceive the world through the eyes of the Iranian characters.<sup>198</sup> Jobrani, as well, offers the audiences a similar perspective; yet he uses a conversational and straightforward technique of presentation by evoking responses and inviting audiences to think about different situations. Jobrani employs invitational rhetoric, but he picks up the role of an entertainer who brings to the audiences the serious and the comic together, hence

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<sup>197</sup> Hostage Crisis/Takeover occurred on November 4, 1979, when 52 American diplomats were taken hostage by a group of revolutionary Iranian students. The Hostage Crisis lasted 444 days, ending on January 20, 1981.

<sup>198</sup> From a child’s perspective in *Funny in Farsi* and from an adult’s perspective in *Laughing without an Accent*. In both cases, it is the Iranian female character, Firoozeh Jazayeri, that narrates her life history to the reader, and it is she who lets the reader in her world.

provoking the narrative imagination. Jobrani's self-experienced situations inspire the audiences to mull over socio-cultural concerns such as discrimination and racism exercised in America, and by doing so, he may engage the audiences' narrative imagination. Therefore, it is safe to say that Jobrani does not aim to persuade the audiences to accept a fact, meaning he does not try to influence the audiences but rather helps the audiences view the Other as a respectful and inalienable member within the multicultural corpus of American population. Niami's rhetoric is not built upon a persuasive mode of communication whereby he can convince the audience to accept a perspective, but he, like the former artists, opens up new and varied perspectives before the eyes of the viewers. He, too, invites the American audiences to experience what it is like to be a member of the Iranian diaspora in America and be an Iranian-American at the same time. The experience is neither purely Iranian nor purely American, but it is an incorporated and hybrid form of experience. It is the curious eyes of the intelligent reader that explore the challenges facing ethnic groups in the film. Niami's creation carries with it audio and visual features, employing the "invitational rhetoric" and "narrative imagination."

In addition, invitation and imagination are not prone to much of a social change on the part of audiences. Despite the fact that eliciting a convincing response or action in audiences is not something definitive, I still argue that the "invitational rhetoric" and "narrative imagination" can work towards familiarizing the reader/audiences to the aspects of the Iranian culture in the works. Meanwhile, the "invitational rhetoric" and "narrative imagination" may not work equally for each group of readers. What is known for sure is that ironic meanings, parody, and the carnivalesque can be grasped differently

by the groups of readers/audiences who come from varied ethnicities and backgrounds, and it is they who eventually provide multiple and differing responses. When going through the works, the readers may come across a set of questions about the Iranian diaspora's cultural practices and America's social values. The readers may constantly compare and contrast different segments of the two cultures, and keep learning and unlearning subjects that exist in both cultures. The readers can, as a result, be engaged in a discursive challenge by bringing their own voices to the texts and exploring as to whether their knowledge complies or conflicts with that the texts attempt to re-present. In a similar manner, Bakhtin's dialogism aligns itself with the notion of open-endedness and/or the constant back-and-forth play amongst the text, meanings, and the contexts. In this regard, the dialogues that occur amongst the Iranian and non-Iranian characters and also between readers and characters shape dialogism and/or the dialogic space to a large extent. When Dumas expresses her view or her father's opinion about consuming ham and marshmallow, Persian wedding, education systems in Iran and America, and bitter sweet memories of Iran and America, we anticipate receiving not only the approval but also, more importantly, rejection of the alleged facts by the readers. Bakhtin asserts, "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to hear, to respond, to agree, and so forth" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 40). The cluster of responses emanating from Iranian and non-Iranian critics inside and outside Iran attest to the presence of approval and rejection. Similarly, when Jobrani expresses his opinions about racism and discrimination, we expect to hear a response to his comments amongst the audience members. In his stand-up shows, interviews and talks, Jobrani states that he confronts opposing views that complicate those of his.

Niami's film, in a similar way, evokes responses amongst the viewers when they find the image of Iranians in *Shirin in Love* as opposed to that propagated in the media. I argue that Dumas's, Jobrani's and Niami's works are themselves responses or, more specifically, counter-discourses to the former utterances about Iranians and Muslims, on the one hand. The works, on the other hand, may prompt responses from the readers/audiences whose views might oppose those in the works. In other words, the artworks under my analysis not only bring together a number of competing voices or ideologies within the texts, but also encourage the audiences/readers to answer back to those voices and ideologies. The idea of the dialogic and heteroglossia corresponds to such a liberal and open space where minor ethnic groups are given the opportunity to participate and express themselves openly in tandem with other mainstream ethnic groups.

In the end, the Iranian artists set out to show that Iranians and Muslims are similar to Americans, and that the Iranian diaspora is part and parcel of the American population. It is not, however, the text and rhetoric only that act to represent and amplify the culture, but it is also the use of humor that empowers the authors in representing the diaspora. Therefore, I propose that the artists can "Humornize"<sup>199</sup> the Iranian diaspora by integrating the act of humanizing and the use of humor into their artworks. Accordingly, all three artists humornize Middle Easterners in various degrees by humanizing Muslims and Iranians as ordinary citizens in America rather than by showing them as outsiders or minor participants who occupy the margins. Dumas invites the readers to experience

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<sup>199</sup> In my effort to explain that humor can also act to humanize diverse ethnic groups in America, I coin the verb "to humornize," which results from blending humanizing and employing humor.

what it is like to live within the domestic and public spheres and see how the members of the Iranian diaspora act in their homes and in public places. While humor forms a large part of the situations along the line of the story, it is the “shared humanity”<sup>200</sup> and “commonalities,”<sup>201</sup> as Dumas concedes, that prompt the audiences to take Iranians as ordinary citizens, despite their differences in cultural practices. By the same token, Jobrani and Niami offer the possibilities of ameliorating the existing understanding about Iranians. Jobrani directly addresses problems like injustice and discrimination in America, thanks to the performer-audience bond in the stand-up comedy. Niami shows that the Iranian diaspora does not distance itself from the Western culture, and that there are a number of components within American culture that also exist in Iranian culture. The pinnacle of Dumas’ and Niami’s humornizing occurs through interracial marriages; Firoozeh Jazayeri becomes Firoozeh Dumas by marrying a French American man, the scene of which takes place in *Laughing without an Accent*. Shirin marries William at the end of the film and becomes Shirin Harson. In Dumas’s and Niami’s artworks, the marriages occur along the line of comic events, and yet there is the depiction of cultural differences. Hence, by juxtaposing various ethnicities and humorous scenes, the artists invite the audiences to empathize and sympathize with the characters by means of “invitational rhetoric” and “narrative imagination.”

In terms of the Iranian diaspora, I suppose Bozorgmehr’s transnationality or “global cultural identity” applies to the Iranian community in America. It is also Malek’s

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<sup>200</sup> In *Funny in Farsi* (9), *Laughing without an Accent* (219), and her talks (refer to the links, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbRryxJ\\_vu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbRryxJ_vu8) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkfRm6uPrrg>), Dumas spells out “shared humanity,” as the concept that can help raise awareness of both Iranians and Americans.

<sup>201</sup> Dumas mentions “commonalities” in a talk, where she places emphasis on the shared understanding amongst various ethnic groups in America. Refer to the link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOAzarvc6w>.

“authenticity,” which confers upon the Iranian community a sense of collaboration with and integration into the white majority or mainstream population in America. Therefore, with respect to Naficy’s proposition that the Iranian community of Southern California occupies a liminal space, I would argue that Iranian-Americans are inevitably exposed to majority and minority cultures in America, as well as being a member of their own community, which has already shaped a large part of their cultural identity. The fact that the Iranian characters in all the works occupy various occupational and social levels speaks to their tendency in participating actively in major socio-economic tiers of the host society, which is America. Niemi’s representation of the Iranian community in America is a narrow and biased one due to his intended depiction of the bourgeois class; however, when put next to Dumas’s representation of other Iranian economic and social classes in America and Jobrani’s unbridled address of the hegemonic and marginal power structures and propaganda, one can arrive at a clear picture of the Iranian community and their heterogeneity of socio-economic, cultural, and religious positions in America. Thus, to re-emphasize and finalize my point, I would argue that to paint the picture with a single brush and claim that all Iranians act and think similarly is a naïve practice because one may promote stereotyping and conflate all Iranians who come from various ethnic cultures under a single or unitary ethnic category.



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