

# LITERATURE OF IRANIAN DIASPORA IN THE CONTEXT OF “CULTURAL TRANSLATION”. TAGHI MODARRESSI, NASIM KHAKSAR

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## **Preface**

Iranian Diasporic literature is inseparable part of modern Iranian literature. In recent thirty years, the researchers of Iranian Diaspora examined the thousand literary texts of exiled writers which are the important arguments for understanding the experience of immigrant and exiled intellectuals dwelling away from their Homeland. Researcher M. Hron in her book “Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture” published in 2009, advocates the role of writer as cultural translators, who create intersemiotic translations of his immigrant suffering. Within the framework of the concept of “*Translating Pain*” and “*Translating Culture*” this article presents the fiction of two Iranian famous writers Taghi Modarressi and Nasim Khaksar.

## **Fiction of Taghi Modarressi in the context of Translating Culture”**

In the last two decades, the concept of "Cultural Translation" has had a special place in both anthropology and post-colonial studies. “Cultural translation” is a term currently much used in a range of disciplines – both inside, and perhaps especially, outside translations studies itself – and in very different ways<sup>1</sup>. American cultural anthropologist Talal Assad describes the problem of understanding foreign cultures in anthropology as a “translation”<sup>2</sup>. “We are all to a

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<sup>1</sup> Buden, Nowotny 2019, 196-197.

<sup>2</sup> Assad 1986, 162-164.

certain extent, even our own culture “translating beings” living in “translated worlds”<sup>3</sup>, -thinks Indian writer Salman Rushdie in his “Imaginary Homelands”.

As M. Hron argues in her influential book “Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture”. “The lynchpin of Translating Pain is the concept of translation. In real life newly arriving immigrants finds themselves “figuratively translating” into citizens of the host country: they must transform their images of home, their idealized notions of the new country, their former values, customs, and, above all their culture into the context of the target of the host country. In their fiction waiters also “translate” their experiences of immigration into narratives”<sup>4</sup>.

Writers have had a special role in the political and cultural life of modern Iran. They were fighters for freedom of expression. Iranian researcher M. Ghanoonparvar in his book “Prophets of Doom: Literature as Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran” points. “The role of 20<sup>th</sup> century writer in Iran becomes that of a prophet, a prophet whose mission concerns not the next, but the present world”<sup>5</sup>.

The 21<sup>th</sup> century Iranian writers in exile are cultural translators. They through literary texts, translate their own culture as well as the pain of immigration in the context of their own sociocultural experience. Quoting German philosopher, sociologist Th. W. Adorno, E. Said in his essay “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals - Representations of the Intellectual” comments “For a man, who has no longer homeland, writing becomes a place to live”<sup>6</sup>.

In this article we explore two well-known writers of Iranian Diaspora Taghi Modarressi and Nasim Khaksar and their fiction to understand the notion of cultural translation.

One of the renowned writers of the modern Iranian diaspora is a famous psychiatrist<sup>7</sup>, and novelist Taghi Modarressi. Modarressi was born in Iran in 1931. In 1959 he traveled to United States, then Canada, to continue psychiatrist’s education. In 1953 in his student years, he published his first novel, “Yakolya

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<sup>3</sup> Magedo 2006, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Hron 2009, xvi-xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Rahimieh 1992, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Said 1994, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Modarressi was the founder of the Center for Infant Study at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and a pioneer in exploring the psychological makeup of infants.

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and her Loneliness". In 1959 other novel "Sharif Jan, Sharif Jan" is published. In the 1980s, after Islamic Revolution in Iran the arrival of a large group of Iranian immigrants to USA gave a new breath to Modarressi.

In 1986, after a lengthy creative break, the novel "The book of Absent People" is published in Iran and the United States. In 1989 novel "The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette" is published. "Modarressi belongs to that group of Iranian exiles who have begun to explore the creative possibilities of experimentation. This vision has allowed Modarressi to write works for an Iranian and American audience at once"<sup>8</sup>. In his essay "Writing with the Accent" Modarressi thinks.

"My eternal voice (which) I discovered... unexpectedly, while listening to the sound of Persian in the streets of Los Angeles and Washington. It was the sound of Iranian refugees bargaining in American shopping malls. My new voice did not have any content... at times my mind was silent, and the writing came with the unexpected halt. Then I hummed with my internal voice. The melodious Persian sound, that could sometimes throw light on forgotten scenes, bringing them out of total darkness and allowing me to invent memories of time, when I even wasn't even born"<sup>9</sup>.

Modarressi explains an attempt to translate from Persian into English during the first few days of his arrival with the following poetic meaning. "If I wanted to say something, I compared Persian and English words as dictionaries do. Persian and English words arranged themselves in two parallel lines like dancers in the nineteenth century ballroom, bowing to each other and trying to find a mate"<sup>10</sup>. Looking at a far-sighted Iranian reality meeting against foreign cultures, Modarressi calls for a dialogue, noting:

"I thought that most immigrants, regardless of the familial, social or political circumstances causing their exile have been cultural refugees all their lives. They have because they fell like outsiders. Perhaps it is their personal language, that can build the bridge between what is familiar and what is strange"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Rahimieh 39, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Modarressi 2008, xii.

<sup>10</sup> Rahimieh 1992, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Rahimieh 1992, xiv.

In 2008 the latest novel of Modarressi, "The Virgin of Solitude," is published. 1997 premature death of author breaks the novel's own translation. Modarressi's wife, a well-known American prose writer, Pulitzer Prize winner A. Tyler<sup>12</sup> came to Nasrin Rahimieh with the proposal, that she translate the novel "The Virgin of Solitude" into English. In the words of Rahimieh. «This preface is also an homage to the man who taught me how to look for lightness and mirth in the depths of alienation and exile»<sup>13</sup>.

In the national, cultural and historical context of the novel "The Virgin of Solitude", such universal issues, such as alienation, loneliness and loss of identity, are raised. As the Iranian literary critic M. Ghanoonparvar in his article "Azra-ye Khalvatneshin, Taghi Modarressi's Last Novel" mentions. "The Virgin of Solitude is a rather unusual novel for Modarressi. He is known as a novelist, who generally deals with philosophical and sometimes mystical themes... In contrast in Virgin of Solitude he seems to pursue social and psychological themes and relying on his knowledge and experience as a psychiatrist..."<sup>14</sup>.

At the heart of the novel is the years of the young Nuri's maturing. As a long-time experienced psychiatrist, viewing psychologically from the point of view of the universal problem of alienation and loneliness, Modarressi underlines the internal perceptions and contradictions of Madame (Nuri's grandmother) and Nuri.

In 1980 Madam lay stretched out on her bronze bed in a deep coma, awaiting the arrival of her grandson "Prince charming". Her dear grandson, who was raised by his mother after leaving for America, was trying to return to the USA, from where he returned voluntarily years ago. In the opinion of the black mourning -dressed neighbors near Madame. "At the age of nineteen plus, Nuri is proud of nothing, but his European looks..."<sup>15</sup>.

The half-meter statue of the Virgin Mary Madam bought from a Polish priest at St. Bartholomew's Church and in the same church she had had it baptized as "The Virgin of Solitude". "In "The Virgin of Solitude" Modarressi

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<sup>12</sup> In 2006 published, the novel "Digging to America" by A. Tyler, which examines the issues of upbringing of two Korean children adopted in Persian and American families, as well as the perception of cultural and national identity.

<sup>13</sup> Rahimieh 1992, ix-x.

<sup>14</sup> Ghanoonparvar 2012, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ghanoonparvar 2012, 4.

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explores the theme of identity in the modern globalized world. Indeed he delves into dilemma of a shattered identity, not only for the protagonist of the novel, but for others, as well, including Nuri's grandmother who is gradually attempting albeit not quite succeeding, to be even more Iranian, than Iranians, even converting to Islam and learning rituals and prayers, but unable to cast off her European upbringing"<sup>16</sup>. Madam was eternal stranger of this world of Iranians and sense of loneliness and aloofness always associated with her and with her Statue.

"When she knelt before it, bit by bit she would become transformed into those strange creatures Nuri and Ladan had seen only in the moves about the movies"<sup>17</sup>.

For Nuri, the Dezashibi house was an enchanted and mysterious place. The non-Iranian, unusual and magical reality of the Dezashibi dramatically changes Nuri's worldview. They were revolutionary in the life of the boy, the presence of the Noble-Viennese grandmother Madam, his formal way of asking his grandson with a European look "Your Excellency". 'So? Your Excellency's Eastern pride prevents You from treating your grandmother in a civilized manner"<sup>18</sup>. "Your blue eyes are German, but Your Excellency looks at the world like Easterners do"<sup>19</sup>.

With the portrayal of characters in "Virgin of Solitude" Modarressi examines Iranian cultural identity, as a significant factor of belonging in globalized world. As a professional psychiatrist he explores universal human feelings such as love, lost, and loneliness.

### **Fiction of Nasim Khaksar in the context of "translating pain"**

One of the renowned writers of modern Iranian Diasporic literature is Nasim Khaksar. Khaksar began writing fiction in 1966, He writes short stories novels, plays poetry, criticism and travel literature. Because his political views Khaksar obliged to leave Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1980. In his host

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<sup>16</sup> Ghanoonparvar 2012, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ghanoonparvar 2012, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ghanoonparvar 2012, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ghanoonparvar 2012, 28.

country, in Holland, Khaksar published to collections of short stories “The Grocer of Kharzeville”, “Between Two Doors” and novel “Windmills and Lashes”.

Since Khaksar began his life in exile, he has been an articulate voice for the experiences of millions of Iranians, who had to adjust to life in unfamiliar lands.<sup>20</sup> Literary critic and psychologist H. Yavari in her article “Post-revolutionary fiction abroad” comments. “The short story “The Grocer from Kharzeville” is a chronicle of the days of the Iranian intellectual's in exile, in which the fate of millions of immigrants, the pain of their loneliness, regardless of nationality, is concentrated<sup>21</sup>.

The Cold, the Snow, the Storm, Iranian writer in the clutches of weekly loneliness, an elderly Dutch lady and her husband are the main characters of the novel. The first months in exile were heavy punishment for writer, who writes.

“The word of an exile is a strange one. At first you think it's just you and your backpack – your four shirts, two pairs of socks and suit, two pieces of underclothes, a towel and the electric shaver. Then for a while it's all about the finding a place to live: you get a small room, a desk, a lamp... Little by little it starts... You began to remember, one memory after another. And suddenly it dawns that the being that sits here is a really an empty space, whose whole existence was floating around somewhere else... You see everything and the same time you see nothing. The pain penetrates to your bones you feel you're cursed”<sup>22</sup>.

The plot of the entire novel “The Grocer from Kharzeville” is built by the *stream of consciousness* “May be it was all of this – and fear-that kept me imprisoned in my room for a week...”<sup>23</sup>. From the horror, one day the heart will stop beating, the writer leaves his door open, so that the old woman and the old man would find quickly, before his body started decomposing. “Afternoons, when it would usually get foggy outside... the gloomy dark green pine trees would appear and disappear in the fog like ghosts... I started to cry...”<sup>24</sup>.

Researcher M Hron points. “Translating pain considers how writers may create effective intersemiotic translations of their immigrant suffering, given

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<sup>20</sup> Mozzafari, Hakkak 2005, 93.

<sup>21</sup> Yavari 1999, 599-602,

<sup>22</sup> Khaksar 2005, 94-95.

<sup>23</sup> Khaksar 2005, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Khaksar 2005, 96.

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the constraints of language, culture, genre and the assumptions of the target audience”<sup>25</sup>.

In every episode of the story N. Khaksar’s figurative language create for us the desperate body of loneliness. “One day you would say how nice it is to be with one’s people and share their whispers. Then when you understood the meaning of a whisper you understood why the rock tolerates years of wind, storms, and sun and then remains forever. You accepted to be a whisper, a slowly whisper, the silent pain of your heart... You lived life as if it were journey, that passed through interlocking doors. You wove a colorful shirt from the laughter of children and hung it in the blowing wind. You lighted a small lantern with the small stream of hope, from those you loved until the sun... But behind of this, little by little, a hand was weaving its own nightmare”<sup>26</sup>.

Return to the room, the world, with its closed and inner alarms, destructive and exciting emotions lying above the window of loneliness, where “red lights of the streets glowing strangely in the fog. It looks just like an eye that had been crying all day”<sup>27</sup>.

The inner conviction of N. Khaksar is that a man in exile lives physically in the place where he does not exist. Memories are his eternal dwelling, from which there is tangible delusions and pain. However, as the author thinks, after the nightmare the sunrise opens and the heartbeat calls for the imperative to live, to live with a real and clear day’s advice and not to want everything, urging to keep up with the XI century famous Persian poet, philosopher, traveler Nasser Khosrow’s words which extracted from his “The Book of Travels”.

“And from there my brother Ghollam Maki Hindu, who accompanied us, and I entered a village named Kharzeville. We had few provisions. My brother went to the grocer by some food. Someone asked. “What do you want?” I’m the grocer”. My brother said. “Anything you have, since I’m a stranger passing through”. But everything my brother asked for, the grocer said he didn’t have. So, from then on, whenever someone spoke like this, we said he must be the grocer from Kharzeville”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Hron 2009, xvii

<sup>26</sup> Khaksar 2005, 102.

<sup>27</sup> Khaksar 2005, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Khaksar 2005, 103.

This story can be divided into three parts, which are the main stages of existential experiences of intellectual in exile. Arrival. Conformity, Belonging. The story has allegorical meaning. Arriving to the new country Stranger cannot have the same life as in his home.

In 1988 "The Last Letter" of the N. Khaksar is published. The preface of this Play in one act begins with T. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" poem. “.. And Through of the spaces of the dark. Midnight shakes the memory. As a madman shakes a geranium...”.

“The Last Letter” is an autobiographical story. It is about middle-aged writer in exile, who try to restructure the memories of the past. Iranian scholar F. Papan-Matin in her article “Text and Memory in the Literature of Iranian Diaspora: The Last Letter, A Play in One Act” comments. “The protagonist’s past, his identity and his commitments are now suspended in a slip zone between being and becoming”<sup>29</sup>.

And then is the Woman, a female companion of writer, the other character in the Play. The Woman was the ghost of the past, to whom he will write letters, which never would send to the addressee. These letters were kept bearing witness to where man came and to understand where he really was. “In the seclusion of his solitary “freedom” – an emancipatory frustration, that takes him into unfamiliar, nihilistic ground – the protagonist is visited by his life, who has come to challenge him out of his bewilderment. This encounter take place in the liminal space in protagonist’s imagination”<sup>30</sup>.

The fiction of Nasim Khaksar is the documentary monologue, that mirroring the exilic experience of thousands of Iranian intellectuals. The metaphoric presence of memory in his stories and plays made the meaning of the existence of the eternal past more visible.

### **Conclusions**

To summer up, let us mention, that Iranian Diasporic literature created new platform for “Cultural Translation”. In their fiction and poetry writers ide-

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<sup>29</sup> Papan-Matin, Lane 1997, 309-310.

<sup>30</sup> Papan-Matin, Lane 1997, 309-310.



alized the notion of the homeland and their unique cultural values, indicating the importance of cultural identity in the multicultural milieu.

If the role of 20<sup>th</sup> century writer in Iran becomes that of a prophet, a prophet whose mission concern not to be next, but the present world, the writers of 21<sup>th</sup> century Iranian Diaspora are becoming cultural translators, whose mission concerns the voice of thousands of exiled and immigrant intellectuals. Through their literary texts, they translate their own culture as well as the pain of immigration in the context of their own sociocultural experience.

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## **ԻՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ ՍՓՅՈՒՌԻ ԳՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ «ՄՇԱԿՈՒԹԱՅԻՆ ԹԱՐԳՄԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ» ՀԱՄԱՏԵՔՍՈՒՄ. ԹԱՂԻ ՄՈԴԱՐԵՍԻ, ՆԱՍԻՄ ԽԱՔՍԱՐ**

Լիլիթ Սաֆրաստյան

Վերջին երկու տասնամյակում «մշակութային թարգմանություն» հայեցակարգը առանձնակի տեղ է զբաղեցնում մարդաբանական ուսումնասիրություններում:

Վերջին շրջանում մշակութային մարդաբանության բնագավառում տարածում է գտել մի նոր հայեցակարգ, համաձայն որի, օտար մշակույթների ընկալումը դիտարկվում է որպես թարգմանություն: Այս հայեցակարգի տեսակետից սփյուռքի գրականությունը կարելի է բնութագրել որպես ընդունող երկրի լեզվով սեփական մշակույթի թարգմանություն: Այդպիսով, սփյուռքի գրողները բնութագրվում են որպես մշակութային թարգմանիչներ, որոնք իրենց գեղարվեստական տեքստերի միջոցով թարգմանում են ազգային մշակույթի բազմազան շերտեր, ինչպես նաև ներգաղթի տառապանքը՝ իրենց սոցիալ-մշակութային փորձառության համատեքստում:

Արդի իրանական սփյուռքի հայտնի գրողներ Թաղի Մոդարեսիի և Նասիմ Խաքսարի արձակ ստեղծագործություններում հստակ ընդգծվում է մշակութային ինքնության կարևորությունը գլոբալ աշխարհում:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** մշակույթ, թարգմանություն, հայեցակարգ, ինքնություն, սփյուռք գրականություն, օտարում:

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**ЛИТЕРАТУРА ИРАНСКОЙ ДИАСПОРЫ В КОНТЕКСТЕ  
"КУЛЬТУРНОГО ПЕРЕВОДА": ТАГИ МОДАРРЕССИ И НАСИМ  
ХАКСАР**

Лилит Сафрастян

На протяжении последних двух десятилетий концепция "культурного перевода" занимает отдельное место в антропологических исследованиях.

За последние годы в сфере культурной антропологии была выдвинута новая концепция, согласно которой восприятие иностранных культур рассматривается как перевод.

С точки зрения этой концепции литературу диаспоры можно воспринимать в качестве перевода собственной культуры на язык принимающей страны. Таким образом, писатели диаспоры характеризуются как культурные переводчики, которые посредством своих художественных текстов переносят различные пласты национальной культуры, а также душевные переживания иммиграции в контекст своего социокультурного опыта.

В свете сказанного рассматриваются произведения выдающихся писателей современной иранской диаспоры Таги Модарресси и Насима Хаксара, в которых подчеркивается важность культурной идентичности в глобализированном мире.

**Ключевые слова** – культура, перевод, концепция, идентичность, литература, диаспора, отчуждение.

**LITERATURE OF IRANIAN DIASPORA IN THE CONTEXT OF  
"CULTURAL TRANSLATION". TAGHI MODARRESSI, NASIM KHAKSAR**

Lilit Safrastyan

In the last two decades, the concept of "cultural translation" has had a special place in both anthropology and post-colonial studies.

Recently, a new concept has emerged in the field of cultural anthropology, according to which the perception of foreign cultures is viewed as a translation. From the perspective of this concept, the literature of the Diaspora

can be characterized as translating of one's own culture into the language of the host country. Thus, Diaspora writers are characterized as cultural translators who, through their literary texts, translate diverse layers of national culture, as well as the suffering of immigration in the context of their social cultural experience.

In this article we examine the fiction of Iranian writers of modern Iranian diasporic literature Taghi Modarressi and Nasim Khaksar. In their fiction Modarressi and Khaksar clearly underline the significance of cultural identity in the globalized world.

**Key words** – culture, translation, concept, identity, diaspora, literature, alienation, loneliness.