

Prelude

Myself as Another

Hamcho meyl-e kudakan ba madaran ...
Serr-e meyl-e khod nadanad dar laban
Just like the longing of children for their mothers
They know not the secret of the desire in their lips.

Rumi, *Masnavi*

I have a terrible memory. I cannot remember what I had for dinner last night, as my late mother used to say, but I remember vividly the day my aunt Gohar – may she rest in peace, though she was not a very nice person – told my mother there was no available seat for me in any of the all-boys elementary schools in my hometown Ahvaz but that she had arranged for me to attend an all-girls school. My aunt was an official in the department of education in our province and this was in the mid-1950s in Iran and schools were then as they are now gender segregated. Boys with boys and girls with girls. Boys had no female teachers, and girls had scarce any male teachers. I spent the first year of my public education in an all-girl elementary school: Dabestan Ordibehesht, it was called; “Tavana bovad har keh dana bovad/Whoever Has Knowledge Has Power,” a line from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, was the very first complete hemistich of poetry I could decipher on our school sign.

I have no clue what I had for dinner last night because my memory (or amnesia to be precise) works that way, or perhaps most memories work that way. There must be reasons, as Dr. Freud would smilingly say, I remember certain things and have forgotten certain other things. But I will not be too busy psychoanalyzing myself in this book. I am not qualified. So this fact of my selective memories is what it is, and I have been perfectly fine with it – there is no psychopathologizing

myself. All I can tell you now is that this book you have kindly considered reading is an adult person's remembrance of his own childhood and a reflection on what he remembers about that childhood. This is an autobiographical meditation you might say – located somewhere between memory and history, which has now emerged as a major scholarly discipline. I don't wish to theorize that discipline. I want to perform it. The adult and the child you'll encounter in this book are of course closely related. They are the same person – I am the same person. I am that child who has grown up, as that child you are about to meet is me so many waxing and waning moons ago. There is a child-author in me and there is an adult-author in me, as an insightful colleague who kindly read the initial idea of this book once observed, and they compete for my attention as I write. This is a friendly competition, like improvisatory jazz – they are not at odds with each other. One is very visual, the other very verbose, again as the same colleague adroitly observed. These peculiar relationships between me at seventy and me in my early childhood, these two *dramatis personae* as it were, work on the borderlines of memory and history – facts and remembrances of facts, realities and the simulacra of realities.

In this book I wish and I plan to tell the story of an Iranian childhood, not *the* Iranian childhood – who am I to say anything like that – just *one* Iranian childhood, which is my own. The reason and the path through which I'll tell this story perforce passes through my memory and our collective history, personal and public, poetic and political. There are things that I will tell you about me you would not have known, and there are things that I will tell you about Iranian history of which you would be aware but not in this particular twist. In other words, the interface, the rendezvous, between me as an aging scholar and critical thinker and me as a child creates a peculiar tertiary space – an interstitial space – between memory and history on which I plan to tell you this story. This relationship between me and me therefore becomes the story of me as another person – me and my other; me and my shadow; me and my doppelgänger, as it were; me in the mirror of myself in which I see many others too. I have been thinking about this book for quite some time, and about the prose that it would inevitably require, and I am lucky my editor and my colleagues who considered the idea of this book thought it worthy of their and hopefully your attention. The book has therefore required and ascertained a particular kind of prose, rooted in my academic

background and the theoretical cast of my mind and yet at the same time, confident in the memorial recollections it wishes to share.

The Prose of My Historicality

Something in this prose I now unfold compels me to write and leads me to think and fathom it through. There is a peculiar music to this prose, a sense of narrative harmony, that I have always heard inside me speaking, but managed to channel into my more academic writing. But this time around it just demanded and exacted its own space, and I said fine, we do as you say. I was born and raised in the provincial capital of Khuzestan in southern Iran. My childhood was neither remarkable nor unremarkable. It was what it was. But my telling it is the mature decision of a writer who is convinced there is something in this prose that resonates with the whole history of a people, a nation, a country, a clime, a region, a world – a world that is much wider than I have seen and much older than I am, but it is in me too: I am the microcosm of that world, and that world is the macrocosm of me. I see that world blossoming in my childhood, and the memories of that childhood echo the pulse of a world that is at once historical and allegorical – deeply ancient and urgently contemporary. It is that oscillation between history and allegory, between immemorially past and overtly conscious present, as they manage their respective affairs through me, that my memories have become the locomotive of my prose.

Allow me to be more specific as to why I write this book with that tone of voice – truth be told: “One of my dear friends asked me if the birds understand each other’s language.” This is Shahab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi (1154–1191), an iconic figure in Islamic and Persian philosophy, the founder of the Illuminationist school of philosophy that brought Greek, Islamic, and pre-Islamic Iranian thoughts together, writing in one of his seminal allegorical treatises called *Aql-e Sorkh/The Red Intellect*; he continues: “I said yes, they do. He said how do you know. I said at the beginning when the Former of Truth wanted to create my very essence, he created me as a falcon, and in that land where I lived there were other falcons too. We used to talk and we could perfectly understand each other.”

Every single time I read that opening passage I am mesmerized by Suhrawardi’s use of the first-person pronoun “I.” If I were to explain

why I wrote this book I would say I wrote this book in part to understand Suhrawardi's "I" – and by deciphering his "I," I want to get closer to my own – to how we Iranians, we speakers of the Persian language who can read him in his original – from the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia and the Caucuses through Iran down to Anatolia – could command a first-person pronoun. Starting with the story of my childhood and working through the continuum of memory and history is how I believe I can unpack the way "I" understand why I am so drawn to Suhrawardi's "I." When a philosopher of a bygone age such as Suhrawardi puts his own knowing subject at the epicenter of his unknowing world, I find in that moment a moral and philosophical momentum in which I also can locate my own knowing subject at the epicenter of my own unknowing world. Suhrawardi says when the *Musavver-e beh Haghighat*/Former of Truth wanted to create him, let us just say God wanted to create him – Suhrawardi is an Illuminationist philosopher and he speaks his own peculiar language – He created Suhrawardi as a falcon. Have you ever heard anything stranger, more astonishing, more beautiful, more miraculous? Who is it talking here? By what authority, what audacity, does he talk this way? What happened to that authorial voice, that agential power with which philosophers like Suhrawardi talked? How did we get from there to here, when we are afraid of our own shadow, as my late mother used to say – may she rest in peace. I write as a product of a colonial world, with a postcolonial claim to my subjectivity, at the receiving end of a brutal history of domestic tyranny and foreign domination, as someone who has still managed to stand up and say "I" and place a meaningful sentence in front of that authorial "I." I wish to find out how that happened. The fact that Suhrawardi said "I" long before I did has something to do with my "I" too – even or particularly when I write "I" in English in the shadow of his Persian "Man/I."

The mystery and power of Suhrawardi's "I" thus becomes even more confounded when we read it today, in our own point of departure in history, when a succession of brutal colonial dispossessions – both moral and material – has robbed nations and their narrations of agential audacity and authority to say "I" with authorial confidence and then stand up to claim a pride of place in the world – not with the fury of a gun but with the light of a reason. Why should anyone believe any single sentence an Iranian, a speaker of the Persian language, or an

Arab, an Indian, a Turk, an African, a Latin American ever utters, let alone writes a history of his or her own homeland, or dares to dwell in the world philosophically, morally, aesthetically, imaginatively? Orientalists had the power of their empire behind them. What do we have behind us? We the vanquished of our own history – victims of military coups that robbed us of what we might have been? By what authority and in what particular way does my authorial voice matter, speak, imagine? We have failed to universalize our particulars, at the mercy of the Europeans confidently universalizing their particulars. We have been reduced to mere native informers, corroborating or even contesting the Orientalist’s modes of knowledge production. The whole field of “Iranian Studies,” of which I am a chaired professor, is an Orientalist project. How can an Iranian do “Iranian Studies”? – or an Arab “Arab Studies,” etc.? That I have all through my academic life defied that fact has been through a political will, not an epistemological argument. I have produced a considerable body of work with that authorial voice but without ever stopping for a moment to theorize it. This book is the beginning of the theorization of my own authorial “I.” We have on the other side of the fake political divide miserable plagiarists in Iran and the rest of the so-called Third World stealing ideas of anticolonial defiance, turning them to pathetic nativist propaganda. In between these two calamities of Orientalists on one side and nativists on the other, something is seriously amiss. I, we, must begin way upstream from these banalities, somewhere where that worldly universalization of our particular will have to begin with that single word, “I.” Years ago, in an essay and then in a subsequent book, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, I raised similar questions – that as any other act of voluntary being (laughing, eating, walking, making love, standing up, or sitting down), thinking too is perforce predicated on the ability to say “I” – “I think,” “I believe,” “I agree,” “I disagree,” “I love,” “I hate,” all as momentous occasions of our living cogito. The question therefore is as much autobiographical as it is authorial, moral, imaginative, philosophical. I turn to my childhood as a point of departure, a moment of having-been-there by way of a reconstruction of the im/possibility of being a person, a Muslim, an Iranian, a postcolonial subject let loose in the world.

The autobiographical prose of people on the colonial offsites of the thing that calls itself “the West” is decidedly different than those exercised at its delusional centers. It is something more than political and less

than psychoanalytic. It is moral, imaginative, epistemological, soul-searching. On that epistemological foregrounding, and linking back to Suhrawardi's "I," we encounter many other prophetic voices, both gendered and emancipatory, as perhaps best evident in this opening stanza of a famous poem of Forough Farrokhzad (1934–1967):

Va in Manam . . .
 And this is I:
 A solitary woman
 At the threshold of a cold season
 Right at the beginning of understanding
 The polluted existence of the earth
 And the simple and sad sorrow of the sky
 And the inability of these cemental hands.

The inaugural moment of "[a]nd this is I" in Farrokhzad's iconic poem is no less awe-inspiring here as Suhrawardi's was so many centuries ago. These "I's" are not generic. They are very specific, and precisely in their specificities they become universal. But, and there is the rub, neither in the allegorical "I" of Suhrawardi nor in the poetic "I" of Farrokhzad is a contemporary Iranian person completely at home. I have a claim on both those "I's" and yet feel the knowing subject of a slightly different unknowability. There is a subjective differential at work here that places the contemporary reader of Suhrawardi and Farrokhzad, so temporally and emotively syncopated, at a triangulated spot. The temporal framing becomes particularly poignant and spatial when the subject, my "I," travels into a space outside the provenance of both Suhrawardi's and Farrokhzad's, when I move westward, physically and intellectually, and different horizons of unknowability enter my moral and imaginative universe.

My Narrative Identity

But I am not just a child of Suhrawardi's. I have many other mothers and fathers – moral and intellectual, real and figurative. As you start reading me you'll soon realize the eminent French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's seminal text *Oneself as Another* (1986 as Gifford Lectures, and then as a book in 1992 in French, and 1992 in English) has a key place in my childhood recollections. I, when I say "I," am not an antiquarian. I am a New Yorker. My Ahvaz, my Tehran, my Geneva, my London, all dwell

in me right here on the jigsaw puzzle of this keyboard on which I tap and write. I am very present in my world. In the course of all our authorial exercises, we reach what Ricoeur calls our “narrative identity.” There is no personal identity without this narrative identity, oral or verbal, for the stories I share with you in this book are the stories that have shared me with the world. Without my narrative identity set into these stories I would be lost to myself. From my personhood to my selfhood, I carry my being a person, a *who*, into my being a persona, a *what*, from my biographical into my existential being-in-the-world. My thinking subject, my cogito, the very predicate of my being-in-the-world, is neither here nor there, but it is where it begins to tell a story, with me at the center of it, as I do in this book tell many such stories. Beginning with the “I” of myself, my cogito is neither “shattered” nor “wounded”; it is nonexistent if placed on the memorial-historical continuum with the interruption of coloniality smack in the middle of it. I can only place myself at the epicenter of a knowing subject as a knowing subject if I can claim both the history of my existential denial by colonialism and epistemological rebellion as a postcolonial person reclaiming his (in my case *his*) history. Am I a moral agent, an ethical being, capable of autonomous thinking, or am I contingent on the fact of my coloniality interrupting the longevity of the history, the power of the culture, and the effervescence of multiple empires that claim me to themselves? The answer to that question will have to be placed on the continuum where my personal memories and my public consciousness coincide.

As I write these very sentences, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has launched a dizzying, dazzling exhibition they have called *Epic Iran*. I am in New York; it is the year that COVID-19 has limited much of our travels. I cannot travel to London to see this exhibition. I am confined to going online and reading and watching all I can about it. As I do, there are curatorial issues I started picking with the exhibition. This is how the curators describe this exhibition: “Exploring 5,000 years of art, design and culture, *Epic Iran* shines a light on one of the greatest historic civilisations, its journey into the 21st century and its monumental artistic achievements, which remain unknown to many.” Whether I agree or disagree with such curatorial rhetoric, I have a sense of proprietorship toward this exhibition. This exhibition is about me, and millions of others that are in that “me” I just uttered, and we are all in that exhibition, the victors and the vanquished of it. I am in New York, the exhibition is in London, the issue at hand is a

country, a clime, an imperil imaginary, an epic adventure in history halfway around the globe. The mobility of my knowing subject is intellectually nomadic, morally stable, sedentary.

So when I say “I,” an entire history that I know well speaks in me, from the Achaemenids down to the Pahlavis, down through the clerical clique of the Islamic Republic. They are all in me, and part of me is in them too. Suhrawardi speaks in me, as do countless other philosophers, mystics, poets, scientists, literary stylists, world conquerors, world travelers, tyrants, and the tyrannized alike. I read them and I speak their language. Today I utter this “I” after a lifetime of scholarship, of turning Iran into the Yoknapatawpha County of my factual and fictive imagination. “Iran” and “I” have become coterminous, like a knowing subject and a knowable world, both as a signifier and as a coded allusion to something that has been in me since birth and yet has taken a lifetime to articulate itself. As a signifier this “Iran” of the Orientalist project of “Iranian Studies” has hitherto lacked this unknowing knowing subject, this cognitive centrality of an Iranian child who has grown up to become an Iranian scholar farthest removed physically from Iran and thus imaginatively moved deeper into it. This mobile, paradoxical, uncanny “I” – like those of Brecht and Adorno in California; Ivan Turgenev, Samuel Beckett, and Sadegh Hedayat in Paris; Hannah Arendt, Edward Said, and Salman Rushdie in New York – is the “movable feast” of Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin making a Yoknapatawpha County out of their exiles that was as real to them as the Ahvaz of my birth and upbringing is to me. My narrative identity therefore dwells precisely in that “movable feast” that brings Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, and Handel’s Xerxes all the way down to Fitzgerald’s *Khayyam* and Matthew Arnold’s *Sohrab and Rostam*, and to the front door of my classroom at Columbia University as I enter to teach HBO’s rendition of George R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones*.

But, and there is the rub, when I speak I also speak as no one in particular – so I also write as an erasure, speak like a long silence, reveal like a blind spot. In a famous poem, “Seda-ye Pa-ye Ab/The Sound of the Footsteps of Water,” Sohrab Sepehri says,

Nasabam shayad berasad beh giahi dar Hend . . .

My lineage may reach a plant in India,

A pottery relic from the soil of Sialk archeological site near Kashan

My lineage perhaps reaches a prostitute in the city of Bokhara.



Figure P.1 Adnan Afravian as Bashu in Bahram Beizai's *Bashu: The Little Stranger* (1989)

I am that plant, that piece of pottery, the son of that prostitute from Bokhara. Here I most identify with that poetic voice of Sepehri, or else with Bashu: the Little Stranger, the central character of Bahram Beizai's iconic film; a boy of dark complexion born to an Arab parentage in southern Iran, and in the course of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988, catapulted by fate to the northern regions of the country to be raised by her adopted mother Na'i. I most identify with that orphaned boy – born and raised in the southern climes of my homeland, a no one and a nobody, as raised by the meandering fate of strangers who became his family.

The Puppet Master

When I was a child, occasionally a puppet master would show up in our neighborhood near Pol-e Siah/Black Bridge in Ahvaz near the Shi'i shrine of Saint Ali ibn Mahziyar. I can imagine the puppeteer sitting in the corner of a pavement near our home, close to a coffee house, and he would move his puppets by two long pieces of wood attached to

them and he would manipulate the puppets and sing or recite on their behalf. He would sing a song and mimic the voices of the puppets and thus share the outlines of a simple story that would delight us all, mothers and their children gathering around the puppeteer. The key to the show was to disregard the puppeteer, disregard the woods he was moving with his hands and fingertips and concentrate on the puppets as they moved and spoke or sang or danced. If you pulled back from the scene you would see the puppeteer and his sticks and his puppets all in one frame, a slightly more careful angle would put the puppeteer out of the picture and you would see just the woods and the puppets, and after a while if you could ignore both the puppet master and his handheld pieces of wood you could concentrate on the puppets ... and magic! They would be standing, singing, dancing, and acting right there on the pavement as if real human beings – better than a human being. As a child I would do precisely that, edit the shots my eyes took of the scene, as it were, pull back to see the reality and pull in to see the fantasy.

This is exactly the way I remember and imagine my childhood memories – both the realities of them and the fantasies they project. At some point as I began to write this book you are about to read I had the prominent Russian formalist film theorists in mind – Sergei Eisenstein or perhaps more specifically Dziga Vertov. But equally cinematically I had Andrei Tarkovsky in mind. *Kino-Eye* or *Cine-Eye* is the term Vertov used to describe the way the filmic vision formally differs from the visions of the biological eye of the human perception. Filmic vision works through *montage* of varied sorts, of a camera's memories cut through a verity of techniques of editing. Filmic reality thus becomes a reality *sui generis* – a vision of truth otherwise hidden to human eyes. In his *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) Vertov produced his masterwork of this way of filming. In his *Kino Eye* (1924) he put the idea into practice. The idea was further expanded into a movement, where the eye of a camera becomes a reality unto itself, working toward a compelling simulacrum of lived reality. But contrary to Vertov's own socialist convictions this version of reality was not more real, or less real; it was a different, more effective reality, leading to his idea of *kino-Pravda*, where cinematic truth is precisely that. Hollywood reality is no more or less real—it is equally unreal, but perhaps more cliché-ridden and apothecic, superimposing delusions of realities onto realities. Tarkovsky's autobiographical masterpieces *Mirror* (1975) resolves this