Katherine Miller: Honorable Mention 2007
Journey from the Land of No:
Proof of Strong Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran

It’s unfortunate that the typical American today would not, in all likelihood, be quick to classify a woman from Iran as strong, able, or modern. In fact, women of most Middle Eastern nations tend to bring to mind the image of a veil; a symbol that has become associated with weakness or conservativeness as a result of oppression. While it is true that oppression exists among women in today’s post-revolutionary Iran, weakness certainly does not. The women of Iran today are not only well educated and alert, but they have proved themselves to be fully modern and prepared to fight for the rights that have been taken from them. In her memoir, Journey from the Land of No, Roya Hakakian tells her story as an Iranian Jewish girl growing into herself as one of those powerful, rebellious Iranian women fighting in the midst of oppression. Although media stereotypes have incorrectly generalized Iranian women as not only Arabian, but quiet, inconsiderant and obedient, Roya’s story bears witness to the fact that Iranian women are actually a shining example of female strength in unfortunate conditions.

Many are quick to generalize all Middle Eastern people as Arabian. In her memoir, Roya speaks of two types of Americans, one of which “think of Iran as a backward nation of Arabs, veiled and turbaned, living on the periphery of oases” (Hakakian 10-11). The media has caused us to conjure up fantasy visions of primitive desert lands; this is an unfair generalization of Middle Eastern countries and an entirely incorrect perception of Iran in particular. In actuality, the streets of Iran’s capital look like that of any other American city. A reporter for the Today Show traversing Tehran’s streets notices “something odd... the bandages, everywhere. Iran is a nose job nation.” (“Understanding Iranian Women”). These modern sights, juxtaposed with the old-fashioned legislation regarding women, are understandably puzzling. One woman responds to this by explaining that “The only thing we can show is our face. So Iranian girls do whatever they can to make it perfect” (“Today in Iran: Understanding Iranian Women”).

Similarly, it can be observed that there are only so many things that Iranian women are allowed to do; as a result, they do everything in their power to improve things for themselves, whether it is their noses or their rights. An essay on political Islam composed for an international conference held by the CMCU (Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding) calls Iran “a dynamic country” (Milani 88). Iranian women’s rights legislation has certainly proved to be progressive, but only because of those strong women who fight for change.

In Journey from the Land of No, women’s roles in society in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran are made blindingly apparent. The most prevalent concern in the future of all the girls in the story is maintaining purity, for the purpose of the even larger concern, marriage. This is exemplified by the marriage of Roya’s cousin, Farah, to a man she didn’t love. Farah’s marriage is of such dire importance that the family feels it necessary to hide her epilepsy diagnosis from her fiancée, Jahad (Hakakian 84). Roya, however, is opposed to the marriage, for reasons apart from
her dislike of Jahad. Her reading has introduced her to powerful female heroines like Helen Keller and Marie Curie (Hakakian 89). Her dreams for herself and Farah extend past marriage, and into scholarly pursuits, and general adventure. She even goes so far as to compare Farah’s marriage to the violent death of a sheep she witnessed at the bridal shower. In her memoir she ends her gruesome description of the animal’s death with the sarcastic comment that “Sacrifice had come, and so had death. Love was sure to follow now” (Hakakian 85). Roya’s grim view of the typical man and marriage consistently encouraged her idea that she and other women should be strong and independent.

In addition to being a woman, Roya is also a Jew in a predominantly Islamic society. She learns early on what she can and can’t do, although she doesn’t really understand why. When the boy who has led the hymns flawlessly for years needs is graduating, she dreams of taking his place, only to have her dreams shattered. It doesn’t matter how beautiful of a singing voice she might have, it’s a matter of “cleanliness” (Hakakian 126). Roya’s status as a Jewish woman haunts her even in her dreams, when she tells Ayatollah Khomeini, “I’m a girl. I’m a Jew. I’m dirty. I must not recite the holy book” (Hakakian 197).

Religious and gender-based struggles that were present shortly before and during the revolution only worsened after. Post-revolutionary law included “polygamy … free divorce for men but not women, and an eventual minimum age of nine for female brides” (Keddie). Women were dismissed from many jobs and encouraged to attend universities instead, which they took upon themselves to solve by pursuing careers as entrepreneurs or in other more private professional positions. In her research paper, Professor Nikki R. Keddie describes the women who pursued alternate careers in these areas as “more resourceful in carving out new working lives than similar men” (Keddie). In addition to bettering their unfortunate new position in society by finding other means of employment, women in Iran communicated their ideas through the press, in magazines such as Zan-e Ruz. They used “Islamically based arguments to strictly limit polygamy” (Keddie) and combat other crucial issues.

Much like the other women of post-revolutionary Iran, the additional restrictions did not discourage Roya’s rebellious and independent nature, either. The Islamic dress code that was enforced on all Iranian women included a “scarf, a long, loose-fitting overcoat, pants, and closed-toe shoes” (Hakakian 175). More and more emphasis was put on women being dressed properly, so as not to illicit men’s sinful desires. The regulation of the veil was frightening and unfamiliar to Roya and her fellow Jewish female schoolmates. In a talk on her memoir, Roya said that “it wasn’t the veil that was scary… it was that it was being imposed on us” (Hakakian). In Journey from the Land of No, Roya tells of how she stood up to authority following Mrs. Moghadam’s speech on the importance of remaining perfectly decent in the presence of men. Her and her friends “stormed every classroom, inscribed our slogans on the blackboard, looted what we could… Never had the sound of shattering glass mended so many broken spirits” (Hakakian 169).

Today in Iran, there still remain issues to be resolved with the treatment of and legislation concerning women, mainly the violence against them that is commonly accepted, and low marriage age (Keddie). Iranian law forces women to sit in the
back of Tehran’s public buses, a method of segregation that some women are in favor of as a means of avoiding the threat of sexual harassment ("Understanding Iranian Women"). However, despite these apparently grim conditions for Iranian women, they continue fighting for their equality, and making progress. One of Iran’s champion racecar drivers is a woman, and there exists a fire department in Tehran operated entirely by female firefighters. While women in Saudi Arabia are not even allowed to drive, women in Iran have become trusted enough to drive taxis. When Roya Hakakian references that first group of Americans, “the misinformed,” she goes on to say that they “always amused [her]” (Hakakian 11). Of course those ill-informed Americans are not harmful in any way; it doesn’t hurt anyone to believe a silly stereotype. However, it could help us look past it, and learn the truth. The strong and powerful women of Iran are important because they have taken it upon themselves to better their own situation. It is crucial for not only Jewish women in Iran but everyone, everywhere, who is being held down unfairly to realize that they can do something about it. For encouragement, we can look to heroines like Roya Hakakian, just like she looked to her own strong literary heroines. Becoming aware of Roya’s struggle and other strong Iranian women like her can give us courage to bravely conquer our own struggles in our own lives.