Suspensions: Contemporary Middle Eastern and Islamicate Thought

Series Editors: Jason Mohaghegh and Lucian Stone

This series interrupts standardized discourses involving the Middle East and the Islamicate world by introducing creative and emerging ideas. The incisive works included in this series provide a counterpoint to the reigning canons of theory, theology, philosophy, literature, and criticism through investigations of vast experiential typologies—such as violence, mourning, vulnerability, tension, and humor—in light of contemporary Middle Eastern and Islamicate thought.

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Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism

Spheres of Belonging

Edited by
Lucian Stone
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of obliteration, the fault lines of the human city that has forecast its own eruption and abandonment long ago, these three unparalleled poetic subjects, who have seen the inside of the prison and thus the outside of being, and now rally their kind to reap the overzealous. The ethos of the caretaker has since vanished, and with it an alternative vision comes to pass, one that shoulders and then purges the mania of several centuries.

Armenians in Iran, or the Limits of Cosmopolitanism

Nastin Rahinieh

Iranian cultural history, particularly its early modern and modern chapters, are filled with instances of travel outside Iran and the encounter with other nations and customs that in turn instigated reflections, individual and collective, on the need and desire for a cosmopolitan outlook. If these encounters did not lead to embracing a principle of universal rights, they offered glimpses of what was accomplished by world citizens capable of crossing and negotiating borders and trade boundaries. The history of Armenian Iranians illustrates this particular urge to reap the material benefits of cosmopolitanism as part of a broader project of the creation of a unified state. The state that was in the process of becoming and consolidated itself into the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) set itself up as a Twelver Shi’ite rival to the neighboring Ottoman Empire. The Armenians, caught in the contestation for power, became an asset to the Safavids and came to play a significant role in Iran’s ability to position itself as a power broker in the region.

The history of the Iranian Armenian community dates back to the seventeenth century when the Safavid monarch, Shah Abbas, forcibly relocated Armenians to the new capital city, Isfahan. The purported reasons for the resettlement of thousands of Armenians were: “(1) a protective military measure against the incursions of the Ottoman Empire, and (2) part of the grand plan to modernize the capital city of Isfahan by advancing international trade.”1 In addition to their contributions to Iran’s stances in trade, the deported Armenians provided superior craftsmanship and knowledge of languages which proved crucial to Safavid Iran’s ability to make itself over as a serious competitor to its neighbors and the Europeans.2 While certain privileges were extended to newly settled Armenians, they were not always safeguarded against fanaticism and mistreatment. In fact, their history reveals that notwithstanding their contributions they remained a minority from the early modern to modern times. The favorable conditions the Armenians enabled through their forced displacement and resettlement formed part of Iran’s encounter with cosmopolitan mobility, but their own experience as subjects of the newly formed empire and their subsequent history reveals the constraints and limits of Iran’s cosmopolitanism.
Against this historical backdrop I undertake to analyze my own seemingly failed attempt at transporting and transplanting a contemporary Armenian Iranian writer, Zoya Pirzad's works into English. This narrative necessarily interweaves aspects of my personal history, which I uncovered in and through Pirzad's fiction and which challenged me to think through my assumptions about a cosmopolitan upbringing I had believed Pirzad and I had shared. This encounter with my past, the history of my Armenian compatriots, and Persian literary expression turned up what Etienne Balibar describes in his essay "Ambiguous Universality":

From a theoretical point of view [...] things could be summarized as follows: real universality is a stage in history where, for the first time, "hummankind" as a single web of interrelationships is no longer an ideal or utopian notion but an actual condition for every individual; nevertheless, far from representing a situation of mutual recognition, it actually coincides with a generalized pattern of conflicts, hierarchies and exclusions. It is not even a situation in which individuals communicate at least virtually with each other, but much more one where global communication networks provide every individual with a distorted image or a stereotype of all the others, either as "kin" or as "aliens," thus raising gigantic obstacles to any dialogue. "Identities" are less isolated and more incompatible, less univocal and more antagonistic.

By charting the incompatibilities I discovered at the core of Iran's modern history and national literature, I hope to bring into focus some of the problematic aspects of Iran's national self-representation, to say nothing of self-glorification, as a cosmopolitan nation open to ethnic and religious diversity and coexistence before the 1979 Revolution.

This retrospective begins with Zoya Pirzad, an Armenian Iranian and one of Iran's most popular contemporary writers, who has won literary prizes in Iran and France. I have been an admirer and avid reader of her fiction. When I was asked to propose a translation for an anthology on Middle Eastern writers, I thought of translating one of Pirzad's vignettes and approached her for permission. Because Iran is not a signatory to the international copyright laws, translators of Persian literature can forego obtaining permission, but the convention the community of literary translators has adopted is to seek the writer's consent.

I emailed Pirzad, and what I had imagined to be a mere perfunctory step turned into a rejection of my proposal on the grounds that my translation of her work into English would be "political." This rejection in turn initiated an introspection on my part and led me to examine my own assumptions both in relation to Iran today, particularly in the wake of the last presidential elections, and the idealized image I had maintained from my memories of the Armenian kindergarten and elementary school I attended in Iran over four decades ago.

Let me add that for a brief period of time Zoya Pirzad attended the same Armenian school on the shores of the Caspian Sea where ironically I first learned to read and write Persian. While Armenian Iranians were entitled to run their own schools, they had to follow the state-mandated curriculum in Persian with the exception of instruction in Armenian language and literature. So it was that I received my first lessons in my native tongue from Armenian Iranian teachers, who were conscripted into endorsing and enforcing Persian language and the national Iranian identity of the prerevolutionary era.

My childhood memories had always been rose-colored images of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish children mingling together in the Armenian school, apparently free from constraints of ethnicity and religion. Pirzad's negative response and my return to a cycle of her short stories set in the Armenian school of our childhood, titled A Day before Easter, instigated for me an interrogation of these cultivated personal memories and questions about the presumed ease with which the Armenian minority coexisted with the dominant Muslim Iranians at that time.

Quite by chance I have been recently reunited in Irvine, California with one of my Armenian schoolmates and her mother, who used to be one of our teachers in the Armenian school. This reunion with my friend, Satenik, and her mother, Khanom (Mrs) Armik, has also facilitated my reexamination of our partially shared history and its relationship to what it might mean to be one of the best writers in the Persian language today and to negotiate life as a Christian Armenian in the Islamic Republic. In one of our recent get-togethers, I asked my former teacher, Khanom Armik, how is it possible for me not to have learned any Armenian when I was going to an Armenian school. She answered my question indirectly by saying they would actively discourage any Muslim who would approach them with a desire to convert to Christianity. They could not afford to be seen as proselytizing to the Muslims for fear of bringing down the wrath of the Muslim clergy. A history of "forced conversions to Islam, discriminatory measures, high taxation, and instances of clerical agitation" underwrites my Armenian teacher's reply to why the Muslim students had not learned Armenian while attending the Armenian school.

In retrospect the request I sent to Pirzad for the right to translate one of her works has all the markings of the same political and historical naïveté of the question I addressed to my erstwhile teacher.

On one level, given the long-standing hostility between Iran and the United States, any type of exchange between the two nations or their citizens is political. This is even more so the case in the wake of all that has transpired after the June 12th elections of 2009. The Iranian authorities have maintained that Iranians in the United States have been fomenting a so-called velvet revolution in their native country. This imagined campaign, the argument follows, has been underwritten by the US government as well as other Western nations. As a result, Iranian-American academics and intellectuals are suspect in the eye of the Islamic Republic. In the current political climate in Iran, Pirzad has every right to be concerned about being associated with individuals like myself whose name might be linked to an imagined imminent revolution being mobilized by foreign powers. In Pirzad's shoes, I too would probably steer clear of any affiliation with any US-based scholar. Since June 12, 2009, scholars, artists, and intellectuals in and outside Iran have been accused of working against the interests of the Islamic Republic, and we have witnessed countless instances of individuals being charged and sentenced to long imprisonment on such suspicions. Against this backdrop, Iranians in the United States must act responsibly.
to avoid incriminating individuals in Iran. In our interactions and communications, those of us situated outside Iran have learned to become vigilant about what we say and whose name we cite in interviews or public discussions, that is if we do not want to sever our ties to our colleagues in Iran. I would like to illustrate the tightrope we walk through an example.

The editor of a prominent magazine in Iran asked me if he could interview me for an article devoted to the uses of theory in the study of Persian literature. The invitation was accompanied with caveats and questions. In a very apologetic tone, the editor asked me if I had been interviewed after June 12, 2009 by any of the news media placed on the well-publicized black list of purveyors of propaganda against the Islamic Republic. He went on to ask whether I was permitted to travel to Iran. He was too polite to ask whether I could travel to Iran and be permitted to leave the country. He and I both know that having a valid Iranian passport, a birthright of every Iranian, is a condition for entering the country, which subjects her, upon entry, to the interpretations of the laws of the Islamic Republic. The editor needs to ask these questions so as to not endanger himself and his colleagues at the magazine. But the reality is that neither one of us can be certain that I would be free of suspicion and that, if I were to travel to Iran, I could return without a detour through the infamous Evin prison. Although the proposed theme of the interview appears innocent enough, my name and affiliation might not. In other words, paranoia has successfully seeped into the very fabric of the work humanists and, I would add, social scientists do across the Iranian and American political divide. Iranians are well practiced in these modes of self-censorship. Long before the advent of the Islamic Republic, the state suspected writers and intellectuals of nefarious plots against the monarchy. The primary difference between the two approaches to political suppression would appear to be that the monarchic system targeted leftists and religious opposition forces whereas the current regime views everyone as a potential suspect.

Knowing this history and the current realities, it followed that I gave up my desire to introduce Pirzad to an English-reading audience at this particular time. This recognition meant also owning up to a barely conscious desire on my part to reconnect to my childhood and youth in prerevolutionary Iran; increasingly, age and exile have become tinged with shades of nostalgia for a lost moment when Iranian national identity apparently did not suppress its linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversities. My immediate reaction when I first read Pirzad’s A Day before Easter was to become immersed in memories, but Pirzad’s rejection jolted me out of reveling in nostalgia. I went back to the stories and I began researching the history of the Armenian Iranian community. There too I found she and I had been living divergent realities and had remembered our past differently.

What I found on closer examination of the stories in A Day before Easter was an apparent divide across ethnic and religious lines that I had missed both in Pirzad’s fictional representations and in my childhood experiences at the Armenian school. This closer reading did not result for me in a conflation of Pirzad’s fiction with her life. Instead, her fiction awakened me from self-indulgent meanderings down memory lane, forcing me to confront representations of what has become a fixed idea of an apparently secular progressive national identity Iran embraced under the last Pahlavi monarch. Pirzad’s fictional representations put the lie to the nationalist propaganda of my generation and propelled me forward to the current forms of propaganda being forcibly imposed on Iranians.

This encounter with cultural history made me realize that, while my desire to translate and publish Pirzad’s work in English was misplaced, I could nevertheless challenge myself to read her work against the grain of my own assumptions and, by extension, the reigning nationalist ideologies of my childhood and youth. This too is an act of “translation.” And it requires me to cite passages from Pirzad’s stories, but by foregrounding my analysis and offering only some passages it does not pretend to be a complete or a definitive substitute.

The three short stories in A Day before Easter highlight some of the most difficult questions at the heart of Iran’s diverse religious landscape, particularly love and marriage between Muslim and Armenian Christian Iranians. They pinpoint taboos and depict fictional characters’ struggle to uphold dominant social and cultural values and occasional attempts at transgression. But those who fail to conform become outcasts, flee across borders, or live a life of isolation. In other words, the stories are charged both with a desire to break free of norms and the recognition of the heavy price that must be paid for transgressing social norms.

The tensions represented in the stories are not representative of contemporary Iran only. Without providing specific historical signposts to help us date the various episodes, the stories give us a sense of time that reaches well before the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. I emphasize this historical dimension to underline how far reaching and embedded are the taboos represented and problematized in the stories. The contradictory impulse to be at once conformist and transgressive makes the stories deeply connected to one another across an expanse of time. Against this backdrop it is not possible to read the interfaith anxieties as only symptomatic of postrevolutionary Iranian social life.

The three stories called “ Sour Cherry Pits,” “Sea Shells,” and “White Violets” chart the life history of an Armenian man, Edmond, from childhood on the shores of the Caspian Sea to adulthood and middle age in Tehran.

In the first story, “Sour Cherry Pits,” the first-person narrative takes us into Edmond’s childhood. The opening line reads: “My childhood house shared a wall with the church and the school.” No sooner does this opening sentence situate us vis-à-vis a place of growing up and learning we are introduced to reminders of the end of life:

Behind the church was a cemetery. No barrier separated the church and the cemetery. Perhaps because there was no need for one. The school principal had forbidden the children from going into the cemetery, and the principal’s words were the highest and the most fortified barriers for us. For years there had been no burials in the cemetery behind the church. The new Armenian cemetery was now located a few kilometers outside town on the road to Tehran.6

Despite the principal’s injunctions Edmond finds himself drawn to the cemetery. He and his friend, Tahereh, play in the cemetery, but he is also fearful of the place and
shies away from being there alone. If the physical presence of the cemetery haunts Edmond's childhood, so does a sense of decay he attempts to counteract, at least in his imagination. As a preschool child Edmond adopts the habit of pulling a chair over to a window seat where he would sit and watch the church and schoolyard. His attention is typically drawn to the flower pattern carved intermittently in the school's white exterior stonewall:

I couldn’t follow the kids’ games during recess. I would stare at the flower relief of the exterior of the school and I would fantasize that when I began going to school during recess, instead of running around and screaming, I would take up a rag and clean the moss collecting inside the five-petal flowers. I thought that when I grew up and became taller I would be able to reach even the highest flowers on the lower story. I had no remedy for the flowers on the upper story.

The compulsion to preserve the exterior façade of the school, like the child's desire to fight against other signs of decay, be they in structures or human relations, resonate throughout the stories. Edmond finds a willing helpmate and something of a soulmate in a childhood friend.

His childhood is marked by his close friendship with Tahereh, a Muslim schoolmate, who is the daughter of the Armenian school's custodian. Tahereh and her family live on the first floor of the school building. Because Tahereh's parents look after the school, the school board is persuaded by Edmond's father to enroll Tahereh. He argues that: "He has been a custodian for many years. It will not please God to have his daughter go to a school at the other end of town because she is not Armenian." Edmond's father nevertheless does not approve of his son spending time with Tahereh:

The schoolyard and the church were the only places where Tahereh and I could play in the evenings. Tahereh never came to our house. Perhaps because she knew my father didn't like it. The room Tahereh shared with her parents was small and didn't have any room for us to play. Moreover if my father learned that I had visited the school custodian's quarters, he would make a scene and my mother and I would have had to endure one of his long and repetitive speeches about differences of class, religion, and ethnicity.

As a child, Edmond is made aware of the importance of upholding these differences, as he is schooled in the importance of the Armenian identity:

In my room I closed my Persian homework notebook and turned my mind to the subject on which I had to write my Armenian composition: what is our duty vis-à-vis our motherland? Beginning with the third grade when we had been given compositions to write every year we had to describe our duty to our motherland. In the first years, the sentences were simpler and the duties delimited: to learn our mother tongue well, not to forget our nationality, and in our prayers implore (and
to bestow freedom on our homeland. I thought, now that I am in sixth grade I have to write more complex sentences and list off more duties.

Like all Armenians in our small town, I had only seen Armenia on a map: old maps in school primers or the heavier tomes owned by the adults.

Interestingly while Edmond and his Armenian peers are being imbued with a sense of belonging rooted in their linguistic, religious, and ethnic identity, Tahereh, who is born into a Muslim family, shuttles between the two worlds interestingly mapped onto the very school.

In fact, Tahereh proves to be a remarkable student capable of enacting an Armenian identity. In many respects, Tahereh outperforms her Armenian classmates even in their own language. Here is Edmond thinking about the above-mentioned composition:

I started a sentence many times and crossed it out. The opening sentence was always difficult for me. I wished Tahereh were there to help me. Tahereh's Armenian composition, like all other subjects, was better than everyone else in the class. There was not a single student in the school who had not been chided by an adult about Tahereh's performance. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? The daughter of the Muslim custodian speaks your mother tongue better than you!" I thought, how did Tahereh manage to write such compositions? Our motherland was not hers.

Tahereh is not only adept at learning Armenian; she attends church with her schoolmates and is equally devoted to learning the prayers:

Tahereh was the only non-Armenian resident of the city at the mention of whose name grandmother did not frown. In grandmother's presence no one was allowed to revert to spoken Armenian or to throw in a Persian word. When speaking to grandmother, the school principal, or the teachers, Tahereh spoke Armenian as if she were reading from an Armenian literary book. On Sundays she would come to church with us and exactly like Armenian grandmother she would shut her eyes fast, kneel down, make the sign of the cross, and recite all the prayers and religious songs from memory.

If Tahereh passes as an Armenian, do her Armenian schoolmates pass for Iranians? With the exception of the lessons they receive in Armenian, they learn from the same primers as Tahereh and are shaped into Iranian national subjects, albeit with more limited rights of representation. Under the Iranian Constitution, Armenian Iranians had the right to elect two representatives, one from the north and one from the south, to the Majles (the National Assembly). As Eliz Sanasarian reminds us, "In the Shah's authoritarian system, minority deputies to the Majlis (similar to the Muslim deputies) were mere figureheads, some with close business ties to the royal family and their friends." This tokenism and other forms of marginalization of the Armenians betray a refusal to acknowledge "the significant role that the
Armenian revolutionary intellectuals and fighters played in the overthrow of the anti-constitutionalist Mohammed-'Ali Shah and in the restoration of the constitutional government in 1908 to 1909. These episodes make up part of the repressed history my generation did not learn in school. The collective national amnesia also barred us from knowing that on October 29, 1910, the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) was informed that with the help of Armenian Iranians “the first group of the Socialist-Democratic Party of Persia had been organized” in my hometown of Anzali.

I have learned in my recent reexamination of personal and political history that my Armenian teacher and her daughter continued to uphold the ideals of social democratic movements. They supported leftist movements before and after the 1979 revolution. Like Pirzad's character Tahereh, their national and political affiliations could be multiple.

Within Pirzad's story, however, Tahereh's embrace of Armenian language, religion, and culture does not stop her from saying her prayers at home. When, for example, Edmond asks her how she performs her Muslim prayers while wearing a cross she has grown accustomed to having around her neck, she responds matter-of-factly that she replaces the cross with an Allah necklace during her Muslim prayers. What Edmond learns from his Muslim friend is the constructed nature of an Iranian school child's identity along vectors of ethnicity, language, and religion. She represents the possibility of thinking outside the normative positions of minority and majority. The behaviors and practices she has learned as a child growing up Muslim in a Christian school do not limit her to choosing one or another set of beliefs. She learns to cross back and forth between embodying Muslim and Armenian identities.

The apparent case with which Tahereh negotiates a path between her Muslim family and the Armenian community in which she has been raised is not replicated on a broader social plane, nor is it shared by the other children. In fact, the type of crossing and self-transformation in which Tahereh engages is far from condoned. As the story reveals, a forbidden relationship of a different kind has developed between the unmarried Armenian principal of the school and Tahereh's mother. The discovery of this relationship reveals a deep anxiety on the part of the Armenians and Muslims about crossing the religious and ethnic divide. During the scene in which Tahereh's father threatens to kill his wife and the school principal, Edmond hears his mother scream: "It is all this woman's fault." After she is left alone with the principal, she says to him: "Don't worry yourself. Everyone knows that it is not your fault." What makes Edmond's mother's position particularly ironic is that she herself is constantly criticized by Edmond and his mother for not fulfilling the role of an obedient and model wife. She moves out of the bedroom she shares with her husband and for the remainder of her marriage, even after the family moves to Tehran, she maintains a room of her own.

The three short stories are connected through a specter of a relationship or marriage between an Armenian and a Muslim. In the second and third stories, Edmond's own daughter falls in love with a Muslim man at the university and finds her family members resistant to accepting their relationship. In the first encounter between Behzad, the young man with whom Edmond's daughter, Alnoosh, has fallen in love, we see how language betrays the internalization of the other:

Behzad said: "I have only one prejudice, not to be prejudiced."

Alnoosh laughed.

Marta said, "Would you not have some ghormeh sabzi? Of course, it is not as delicious as the ghormeh sabzi the Persians (farshâ) make."

Behzad asked: "the Persians? I am not Persian. My parents are from Tabriz."

Alnoosh laughed louder. "Armenians call all Iranians Persian. It doesn't matter which part of Iran they come from."

Behzad's attempt to make his own difference a point of contact between himself and Alnoosh's family runs up against the totalizing mechanisms that prevent differentiations between and among Armenians and non-Armenian Iranians who themselves represent different ethnicities and languages, to say nothing of other religions. But these multiple differences fade away and lose their purchase over and against group identification and conformist behavior. Those who fail to fit into these expected patterns become outcasts.

In the third and final story, Edmond learns that the single Armenian woman who works alongside him as the vice principal of the school he runs had to leave her hometown and family because of her love for a Muslim man. Danik's life story remains largely shrouded in mystery. She does not mention her past and Edmond's wife does not permit herself to reveal what she has been told in confidence. But Edmond learns enough to realize why she moved from Tabriz to Tehran and never married. Even long after it would have mattered, she makes excuses for not going to church. At Easter dinner she tells Edmond that she did not have time to stop by the church to pick up the blessed bread, but Edmond recognizes that she was merely making an excuse. Danik's pretense, like the need to preserve the façade of the mess-ridden school, is an impulse and a learned habit. It is a social necessity that has become a part of Danik's character even though she has refused to adhere to the dictates of tradition.

Her isolation and exile stand as counterexamples to Tahereh's mobility, as well as Alnoosh and Behzad's to some extent. The young couple decides to leave Iran, but long after their departure Edmond and his wife, Marta, are faced with questions about their daughter's marriage to a Muslim man. Ironically the lessons of diversity the young children learn in the school are undermined at the level of social mores.

The impossible marriage of Muslims and Christians depicted in A Day before Easter and the difficulty of trespassing between the domains of difference foreclose the possibility of challenging the traditional and the normative. The possibility of translating and transporting oneself from one Armenian realm of experience into a Muslim one or vice versa proves illusory, like the rare stone Tahereh challenges Edmond to find. One day when the two children are at the seashore competing to see which of them can collect the most sea shells, Tahereh tires of the game and suggests that instead they search for something unusual. When Edmond asks what that would be, she responds: "For example a black stone with a blue stain." Edmond
searches in vain and for some time for such a stone, but one day Tahereh gives him a stone that fits the description. But here is what Edmond discovers: "A few days later when I was playing with the stones and the seashells, I rubbed my hand on the black stone and the blue stain rubbed off. When I told Tahereh, 'You cheated. This doesn't count,' her eyes widened and she broke out laughing." "What is child's play for Edmond and Tahereh becomes a painful lesson for the adults. As represented in Edmond's own life, the impossibility of bridging the divides of language, religion, and ethnicity will continue to imbue his life with a heavy foreboding of loss, decay, and loneliness.

In fact, the complex dynamics of acceptance and disavowal of a difference deeply ingrained in the position of a minority within a minority is beautifully illustrated in a passage in the third story. The passage in question is a flashback to the protagonist Edmond's childhood. On the surface it is a memory of the perennial disagreements between Edmond's parents and the blame Edmond's mother receives for failing to conform to the norms of behavior. The episode recalls when his mother first bought him green ink, which he was to use throughout his life. To his father's objection about the choice of green ink. Edmond's mother points out that she bought it because it is different from black or blue ink. The father mocks his wife for wanting to do things differently from others. In the midst of this exchange, Edmond's mother invites Edmond to test the ink. When Edmond's mother urges him to write something to see if he likes the color of the ink, Edmond writes in the corner of the Armenian Iranian newspaper Alīk. "Green ink is different from the rest. I like people and things that are different." The appeal of the tantalizing and the transgressive undergirds all three narratives, but difference becomes a source of anxiety and fear both for the Armenian and the Muslim characters. The desire to stand out is, in other words, undercut by the fear of isolation and marginalization.

That Edmond happens to write this line on the corner of a page of Alīk, the Armenian daily newspaper first published in 1931, can be read as an attempt to register the will to stand in nonconformity on the most symbolic level of Armenian Iranian identity. If the newspaper is a reminder of the concerted effort to maintain and uphold a form of identity sanctioned by the community, Edmond's message is a child's means of supporting his mother's bold, albeit frustrated, gestures of defiance.

Captured by romanticized images of my childhood, I too wanted to deliver a message by translating Zoya Pirzad into English, making her part of the body of Persian literary texts available in English. Her refusal to have her work appropriated into what we Iranians in diaspora can claim as part of our national legacy is an apt response to the long history of collective amnesia with which we have not yet come to terms. Iran's political landscape today has forced those of us who are part of the Muslim majority to experience the perils and uncertainties the Armenians have long internalized. We too retreat from the possibility of engaging in "political" acts that might imperil others and ourselves. What will we remember of this moment in our history and how will we attempt to rewrite it?

Not surprisingly I am haunted by questions of memory and history in light of my working through the attempt to translate Pirzad. She has given me another recent gift about translation.