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Race and the Aesthetics of Alterity in Mahshid Amirshahi's *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*

Focusing on black women Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur in Mahshid Amirshahi's novel Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr *(1999), this article examines literary representations of the African-Iranian presence, and provides a critique of race and slavery in twentieth-century Iran. In light of the history of the Iranian slave trade until 1928, and the reconstruction of race and gender identities along Eurocentric lines of nationalism in Iran, the novel under scrutiny is a dynamic site of struggle between an "Iranian" literary discourse and its "non-Persian" Others. The "aesthetics of alterity" at the heart of the text is, therefore, the interplay between the repressed title-character Qadam-Kheyr and the resilient minor character Sorur, each registering Amirshahi's artistic intervention into a forgotten corner of Iranian history.*

The African-Iranian Presence

The title-character of Mahshid Amirshahi's novel *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* (1999) is a black nanny of African descent. She was bought into slavery on the way to Mecca when only a child, then brought to Iran and raised by her new owners in Qazvin. By the time the novel opens in early 1940s Tehran, the elderly Qadam-Kheyr, the loving nursemaid to two generations of an aristocratic Qazvini household, is a representative of an emancipated slave and a member of the African-Iranian community.

Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr is a faithful yet reflective, perceptive and often critical, and therefore a significant portrayal of the African-Iranian presence from the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century urban Iran. Slavery in Iran dates back to the third century AD as an informal institution that lasted into modern times until 1928, when the Majlis abolished all slaveholding practices and declared any slave entering the country emancipated.[1] In this long period, as Janet Afary notes, "domestic slavery" was the most prevalent form as male (*gholam*) and female (*kaniz*) slaves "worked in the royal court and elite homes as concubines and domestic servants, harem guards, nannies and tutors, artists and masons, and performers and entertainers."[2] Black slaves, in particular, were imported from Africa via the Indian Ocean

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and the Persian Gulf, or at times from the slave markets in and around Mecca during the hajj pilgrimage.[3] With Shiraz as the center of the slave trade in southern Iran, and Tehran hosting the largest number of slaves with around 2.5 percent of the city's population by 1867,[4] the wealthy elite exploited some *kanizes* to act as their children's *dadeh* or "favoured companions of the young members of the family."[5] On the origin of such slaves, Willem Floor points out the East African roots of three distinct regions. The most expensive ones from Ethiopia and Somalia were called "Habashi"; those imported from Sudan were referred to as "Nubi or Soheyli"; and those of Bantus origin, "shipped via Zanzibar," were referred to as "Zangi"[6]—or, as we read the indigenized racial slur ascribed to Qadam-Kheyr in the novel: *Siah Barzangi* (the black from Barzang).[7]

The second volume of Amirshahi's tetralogy, *Mothers and Daughters* (1998–2010), *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*, recounts the final months in the life of the title-character, a former slave and current domestic servant in the household of a Qazvini aristocrat, Baba-jan Ashaq Mirza, and the descendants of his daughter Princess Mah-Taban: namely, Mah-Tal'at, Mehr-Banu, Mehr-Olia, and above all Mah-Monir. *Mothers and Daughters* (*Madaran va Dokhtaran)* centers on two generations of this extended family in four volumes that span the course of the twentieth century in three cities. From the long aftermath of the 1906–11 Constitutional Revolution in Qazvin and Tehran (books one to three: *Abbas Khan's Wedding*, *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*, and *Shahrbanu's Honeymoon*) to late twentieth-century Paris following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, reminiscent of Amirshahi's life and work in exile (book four: *Mehr-Olia's Self Reflections*), each novel is the historically situated story of a mother and daughter, and the celebration of their femininities at the epicenter of the text.

Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr stands out amongst Amirshahi's mothers and daughters in that the maternal bond of Qadam-Kheyr to Mah-Monir, the youngest of the sisters under her care, is that of a subordinate non-Persian nanny to an Iranian woman. However affectionate, the bond between these women is unequal and—due to the Perso and ethnocentric body politic embedded in the narrative—symptomatic of a master and slave dialectic at the epicenter of the text. Qadam-Kheyr, thus labelled *dadeh* (nursemaid), has not only raised Mah-Monir and her sisters but also their late mother Princess Mah-Taban for whom she was initially purchased as a gift from Mecca. Since then, Qadam-Kheyr has earned the respect of Mah-Taban's children and a position of authority over fellow servants in the household. A displaced African partially assimilated into the host society, she is as assertive as a domestic servant can be, practicing Shia Islam and speaking with a characteristic Qazvini accent. At the heart of the plot, however, is a story of inevitable decline as the elderly Dadeh is suffering from a fatal stomach disease named *jo'*. In the course of her illness and ultimate death, which coincides with the Allied invasion of Iran during World War II, Qadam-Kheyr is witness not only to a nation at war but also to the changing fortunes of the black folk such as herself who were bought into slavery in the nineteenth century but now find themselves increasingly excluded from Iran's urban and middle class society in the twentieth century. As much as Qadam-Kheyr spends the final weeks and days of her life basking in memories of

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bygone days, ironically without a clear sense of her roots before enslavement, Mah-Monir and her sisters Mah-Tal'at, Mehr-Banu, and Mehr-Olia continue to strive and thrive as modern Iranian women in early Pahlavi-era Tehran: a brave new world in progress that remains alien to the expiring black woman.

Reading the novel it is important to bear in mind that Qadam-Kheyr is not the only notable figure of African descent. Sorur, born to black slaves Sa'id and Nur-Saba in the same household, is a young black woman who is just as bold and ambitious, but not as privileged, as Mah Taban and her daughters. Determined to leave her mistresses' house in Tehran and return to her childhood home in Qazvin, Sorur is a resilient woman who seeks to pursue her dreams against long odds, no longer as a *khaneh-zad* (domestic servant) following Dadeh's destiny, but as an educated woman in search of her dreams in a more egalitarian society. In what follows, I suggest that the decisive gap between Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur, breached in a critique of race and slavery from the former's repression to the latter's defiance, brings to the fore an aesthetics of alterity that is definitive to Amirshahi's literary world.

The case for the plight of African-Iranians, on which my reading of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* rests, is a contested one. Nineteenth-century travelers to Iran highlighted the benevolent treatment of African slaves compared to the deplorable conditions in the Americas.[8] While Islam, like the Judeo-Christian tradition, does not strictly prohibit slavery, some regard the practice to have been historically "regulated by a number of laws to ensure that the spiritual well-being and the physical well-being of the slave, as a Muslim [convert], are carefully protected."[9] Examining the comparatively "benign treatment of Iran's urban slaves," Afary observes that though "conscious of color as a matter of aesthetics and social standing," a point to which I return when Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur each roam the streets of Tehran, "Iranians did not regard it as an insurmountable barrier to the economic and social integration of former slaves."[10] As Vanessa Martin also notes, slavery in the Muslim world, and Iran in particular, was never "an element in production" as was the case with the formation of capitalism in Euro-America. However, the fact that slaves were primarily "a form of consumption" in Islamic societies renders the economics of slavery conducive to the reception of African laborers in Iranian history.[11] In other words, even though racism as a formal institution of Persian supremacy did not materialize in the Iranian context, the mere commodification of slaves, however benign the treatment before or since the emancipation act of 1928, resorts to a conception of social privilege against the interests of former slaves and the nascent African-Iranian community.[12]

Given the historical backdrop behind the moment of narrative inception in *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*, it is evident that as Amirshahi's narrator begins to speak in the early 1940s, Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur are already emancipated, having potentially become African-Iranian citizens. This, as the dramatic and thematic structure of the narrative shows, does not mean the black women enjoy equal rights to their Iranian counterparts, for the gap between the abolished practice of slavery and the standing institutions of domination, within and beyond the text, is too crucial to ignore. In search of untold histories, Behnaz Mirzai rejects the widely accepted view on the benevolent nature of Iranian slavery and its aftermath. Adhering to a broad conception of

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structural violence, she argues that not unlike the American example, "involuntary migration of Africans through the slave trade" led not only to the African-Iranian presence but also to their incomplete socioeconomic mobility and continued marginalization long after the abolition of slavery in 1928.[13]

In the literary domain, I further propose that the world of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is a charged space in which the centrality of Amirshahi's "Iranian" characters and the marginality of "non-Persian" characters (quasi-racial designations to which I return) shape an exclusionary discourse around the novel and within the narrative. Securing the thematics of otherness against the fortunes of Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur, such exclusionary practices are twofold and address the characters' gender and ethnic identities. As I will demonstrate in conversation with Amy Motlagh, the social progress and upward mobility of major Iranian characters in the novel, above all Mah-Taban and her daughters as women of high social standing in twentieth-century Tehran, materialize at the expense of Qadam-Kheyr's assigned role as the non-Persian nanny stagnating in the domestic sphere. While the elderly Qadam-Kheyr is doomed to perish within the confines of a gendered and raced space, the youthful Sorur vies to break free and recast her destiny as an African-Iranian woman. Furthermore, as I will argue through Reza Zia-Ebrahimi's critique of Iranian nationalism, the narrative reception of both characters of African descent is fed by an aesthetic if not ideological conception of "whiteness" according to which dogma, prevalent in Eurocentric discourses of nationalism, Persians are deemed racially superior to their regional neighbors in the Muslim world, and are thus affiliated with the Aryans of Europe. In line with the former and at odds with the latter process, Amirshahi has envisioned a gendered, raced, and also classed world that is fraught with sites of violence *and* redeemed by sights of resistance. What I term an "aesthetics of alterity" at the heart of the text constitutes the interplay amongst the Persian narrative voice, Qadam-Kheyr's subject position as a former slave, and Sorur's yearning for racial and social justice as the voice of a new generation—all registering the ethics and politics of Amirshahi's artistic intervention into a forgotten corner of Iranian history.

What's in a Name?

The expression *qadam-kheyr* (literally: one with beneficent steps) characterizes, in the Persian language, a person with goodwill whose proverbial arrival brings joy and prosperity to people's lives. For Amirshahi the name Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr bears within it a relational etymology that correlates the inherent warmth of the black nanny with the happiness of Mah-Taban and her daughters on the receiving end of the nursemaid's love and affection. In an unrequited maternal bond, Qadam-Kheyr graces the lives of these women with her presence without necessarily serving her personal interests and desires. Given her position as a former slave and domestic servant, it is my initial concern that the benevolent connotations of the name Qadam-Kheyr, coupled with the title Dadeh, secure the character's alterity. In her study of raced and classed

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nannies in the classical Persian romance which also pertains to Amirshahi's contemporary fiction, Farzaneh Milani argues that despite

> their central role [in Persian romances], nannies have no names of their own. They are excluded from the world of personal naming. The need to individualize them is overshadowed by their function as stock characters. Their labels locate and anchor them in a relational system in which their role rather than their individual distinctiveness matters.[14]

Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr's original name, that is the name given her in Africa prior to being bought into slavery, is an empty void probably unknown to the character herself. "The world of Qadam-Kheyr," Amirshahi's narrator informs us at the outset of the novel, "was limited to the house of the Princess [Mah-Taban]" (*DQ* 8). This is a poignant fact considering that Qadam-Kheyr is by nature and disposition an assertive woman who had practically "reigned over Mah-Taban's realm," governing fellow servants and nurturing the princess' daughters with maternal authority (8). The application of the verb "reigned" (*hokm randeh bud*), however, ironically curtails Qadam-Kheyr's influence since she is only allowed to assert her strength insofar as the children under her care remain with her. As the opening chapter reveals, Mah-Taban's youngest daughter Mah-Monir has become Qadam-Kheyr's "entire being" since the death of the princess (7). Now with the imminent migration of Mah-Monir and her husband from Tehran, Qadam-Kheyr is hopeless and—as it ultimately turns out—devoid of the will to live. The fateful dependence of Qadam-Kheyr on Mah-Monir, which in effect is the fulfillment of her role as the nanny, exposes the precarious position of the woman within the hierarchy of the character system where she dwells.

Milani traces the narrative function of the nanny, many of them slave girls, in works of Persian literature ranging from the stereotypical figures of guile and deception in the classical romance tradition to the "upholders of the status quo" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century works of fiction and nonfiction by women.[15] Along with Amirshahi's Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur, the list goes on to include the kidnapped slave girl Mehrangiz in Simin Daneshvar's "A City Like Paradise" (1961); the influential *dadeh* in the *Memoirs* of Taj al-Saltaneh (1969); and the harem dweller Sonbol Baji in Haleh Afshar's reflective essay "Age, Gender and Slavery in and out of the Persian Harem" (2000). In her bracing critique of the above, addressing the role non-Persian characters play in the formation of literary discourse in twentieth-century Iran, Amy Motlagh notes that with the rise to prominence of the companionate marriage and the refashioning of women's gender roles into the Pahlavi era (1925–79), domestic servants gained socioeconomic significance in facilitating the presence of their mistresses in the public sphere. On the literary stage, Motlagh argues, female domestics, "whose womanhood exceeded or existed outside of the law," morphed into "a topos in modern literature" that "would increasingly become the 'other' to the imagination of a central, dominant Iranian womanhood."[16] We may here think

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of the semantics of Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr's post-slavery appellation, as the faithful *qadam-kheyr*, and evoke the bond between Dadeh and Mah-Taban's children in twentieth-century Tehran, mainly the latter's enactments of gender as urban middle class femininities and the former's captivity in the domestic sphere. Motlagh goes so far as to term such literary and historical treatment of the domestic worker as "an *internal* process of colonization" through which the "companionate wife," granted relative autonomy, advances "the civilizing mission of the Pahlavi statist nationalism, and consolidates her own subjectivity against the objectivity of those (female) figures of state alterity to whom she must minister or manage: the rural, the tribal, the lower-class, the servile."[17]

There is, besides the gendered and classed implications of the Pahlavi statist nationalism outlined by Motlagh and evident in *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*, a racial undertone attached to the treatment of Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur. In addition to the positive discrimination endemic to the name *qadam-kheyr*, Amirshahi posits Dadeh in encounters where she is labeled and derided in racist language. "*Siah Barzangi*" (the black from Barzang),[18] "*zolmat al-hajiyeh*" (the dark missus), and "*tinat-ash iqazah vahshi as*" (in Qazvini accent: she has such primitive nature) are only some of the epithets evoked to criticize Qadam-Kheyr's personality (*DQ* 9, 248). Elsewhere Sorur, in a turning point of the plot, decides to leave Tehran, "this inglorious city where a bumpkin is always a bumpkin and a black always a black" (149). Equating the inferior status of the country bumpkin (*shahrestani*) in metropolitan Tehran with the plight of the African-Iranian, Sorur clearly points out the social stigma attached to her markedly raced identity in the heartland of Iran. Part of what Amirshahi seeks to expose here might be the ethnocentric antagonism often embedded in Persian literary discourse towards black peoples. Minoo Southgate, leafing through works of tenth- to fourteenth-century Persian prose and poetry, notes that figures of African descent are "frequently pictured as ugly and distorted, intellectually inferior, remote from civilization, excessively merry, sexually unbridled, and easily affected by music and wine."[19]

Yet the more significant issue at stake, which concerns the following reading of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*, is a Eurocentric conception of "whiteness," feeding a nationalist sense of Persian purity, which lurks as a muted subtext towards the othering of Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur. A rhetorical analogy, made by the influential ideologue of Iranian nationalism Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1854–97), helps to reveal the alienation of Amirshahi's black characters under the narrative gaze: Upon the gathering of "an Iranian, a Greek and an Englishman, and then an Ethiopian negro and an Arab," one should "clearly be able to judge which one is clean and civilized and which other savage."[20] Calling to task the rabid racism Kermani imports from European colonial discourse, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi argues that towards the turn of the twentieth century a certain brand of Iranian nationalism materialized through a dual process of "self-Orientalization" and "dislocation." In their encounter with European modernity, Zia-Ebrahimi notes, Iranian intellectuals who had not formally experienced colonialism began to look up to the European ideology of progress, and in search of a scapegoat for their socioeconomic backwardness internalized "Orientalism's prejudices towards Islam and the 'East.'"[21] Concurrently conscious of a fictive

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pre-Islamic past when they used to be in racial unison with their European counterparts, Iranian intellectuals indulged in a "politics of dislocation, or the attempt, through the racial discourse of Aryanism, to *dislodge* Iran from its Islamic and Eastern reality and artificially force it into a western one."[22]

It is not my intention here to read *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* as a "dislocative" national allegory; nor am I implying that in the novel the Aryan myth is juxtaposed with the blackness of Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur so as to maintain Persian supremacy. Nonetheless, "whiteness" as an aesthetic if not ideological construct is part of the identity politics permeating the narrative in light not of an anti-Semitic racial ideology but of the nativist rendition of Iran's non-Persian, and in our case African-Iranian, figures of alterity. Coupled with the negation of Dadeh's femininity through the ironically feminist strategy of empowering Iranian women at the heart of the text, the further denial of her agency as a black woman, or non-Persian character, only aggravates the problem of Qadam-Kheyr's marginality within the narrative. Halfway through the novel, as I will illustrate further on, is an episode where the reader is witness to the performance of a play at a Tehran venue during which the nationalist icon of *mam-e mihan* (motherland) is Europeanized as a public spectacle. Up on the stage, the appearance of a visibly white woman ("a bosomy, blue eyed, and blond haired woman holding a torch" [*DQ* 130]) as Iran incarnate reveals Amirshahi's effort to expose and dismantle the binary opposition between the likes of Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur on the one hand, and their Iranian counterparts dwelling on the streets of Pahlavi Tehran on the other. Amirshahi, or the implied author, is simultaneously complicit and discontent, at odds and in cahoots, with the grand narrative of Perso-Iranian ethnocentrism in her portrayals of the black women Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur.

In an interview Mahshid Amirshahi notes that early in her career she decided to write against the grain of her contemporaries, namely the league of "engagé literati" whom she comically calls "*panj tan-e al-e qalam*" (the five scions of the pen): Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Sadeq Chubak, Sadeq Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi, and Simin Daneshvar.[23] Amirshahi's categorization surely glosses over the varied, and often conflicting, voices that have articulated social consciousness in Persian literary imagination. Yet insofar as the bridge between the aesthetic and the political is concerned, Amirshahi has been more engaged with the interiority of the feminine voice than with ideological commitment to external politics. She has elsewhere noted her objections to the overall representation of femininities, and relative dearth of empowered female characters, in the body of works produced in the canon of twentieth-century Iranian fiction.[24] Characterizing Amirshahi's remedial approach, Hasan Mir-Abedini describes her as a "modernist" whose principal mode of expression has been an "escape from the ennui of daily life into the world of childhood."[25] In works that are composed of "personal and emotional experiences" peppered with "social criticism," Amirshahi's oeuvre opens in the 1960s with nostalgic accounts of childhood years and the blossoming of feminist concerns in early collections of short stories.[26] The rampant expression of social and political satire in *Dar Hazar* (1987) and *Dar Safar* (1995)—produced on the verge and in the throes of exile—may be read as bitter disruptions in the development of her literary agenda. It is rather in her magnum opus *Mothers and Daughters*

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(1998–2010) that one finds the ultimate manifestation of a post-ideological vision registered in Amirshahi's literature, mainly through the representation of nannies and domestics as objects of personal reminisce and subjects of social criticism.

Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr occupies a deeper layer of signification given the trajectory of Amirshahi's writing since her exile in France following the Islamic Revolution. Whereas Mir-Abedini considers Amirshahi's early work as "modernist," I maintain that *Mothers and Daughters* is what Amy Motlagh describes as "postrealist," referring (following Kwame Anthony Appiah) to "a tradition developed beyond the boundaries of European literature, and laying claim to a different tradition of modernism."[27] As a historically expansive tetralogy that is rooted in Iranian soil yet was written in Paris and produced away from home in Stockholm, the four volumes of *Mothers and Daughters* are, borrowing Motlagh's words, "retrospective" tales that reflect on "the eve and inception of the [1979] revolution from a narrative subject position in exile." As postrealist fiction, the stories negotiate the exilic position as "their presentiment of the loss that would come with the revolution [in-between books three and four] is often mediated through the sympathy and anxiety that the narrator feels for the family's domestic servants [Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur in book two]."[28]

An interesting case in point is the paratext of the cover design binding *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* to Amirshahi's social background. The design centers on a framed family portrait, possibly of an early twentieth-century urban Iranian household, which shows a father and his children along with their African domestic servant standing guard in the background. The three seated men at the focal point, suited in black and posing like English gentlemen, appear to be a modest patriarch winged by his confident sons. Stooping behind them is a young woman also dressed in black, who, from the way she lovingly rests her arms around the elderly man's neck, may be his granddaughter. The fifth person featured in the photograph is a female black domestic servant who stands in the far corner in contrastive white hijab, with a sad and stern countenance. She appears physically and emotionally detached from her masters, but she remains definitive to the portrait as a token of the family's social standing. Should we read this photograph as a visual proxy for the fictional world between two covers, then the black woman in the background is likely to be the younger woman's *dadeh* in the absence of her biological mother. As the maternal figure who seems to visualize Qadam-Kheyr, the nanny on the cover foregrounds in her dark skin and white veil the unveiled and fair-skinned young woman who towers over the three seated men. In a sense, then, the decisive moment of the photograph is the uneven chemistry between the *mother* (Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr) and *daughter* (either of Mah-Taban's children) at the heart of the master and slave dialectic that is to unfold before the reader.[29]

What is more intriguing, given the retrospective feel of the text, is that the family portrait on the cover also hangs on a wall in Amirshahi's house in France. As seen during an interview with BBC Persian, the photograph reproduced on the cover of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is originally part of an ensemble of family portraits (including that of Amirshahi's headshot) that furnish her study.[30] That the character of Qadam-Kheyr is based on Amirshahi's own *dadeh* may or may not be the case. But

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the external reality of a family portrait that firstly decorates the author's private residence and secondly gives paratextual significance to her work blurs the fine line between the authorial Amirshahi in exile and the fictional Qadam-Kheyr back home. From the production of the novel in the diasporic literary system to its reception in Persian-speaking communities, *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is a retrospective and, by virtue of the protagonist's idolized servitude, a postrealist novel that reconstructs the past not only to preserve the memory of a lost social order, but also to come to terms with the present reality of exile after the cataclysmic Islamic Revolution.

Not unlike the image of the black woman reproduced on the cover, Qadam-Kheyr is simultaneously sidelined and centralized in Amirshahi's nostalgic ruminations. For the African-Iranian character, the world of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is at once limiting and liberating. Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur are resilient women who face and confront oppression in a color-conscious society, but remain dehistoricized due to their lifelong commitment to the progress of men and women they call master and mistress. On the one hand, Amirshahi's endearing depiction of Dadeh and Sorur is in line with Alice Walker's all-inclusive ethics of "womanism" in a post-racial vision of universal harmony.[31] On the other hand, the de-personalizing reduction of the characters' agencies to their pseudo-maternal and domestic responsibilities calls to mind what Toni Morrison describes as "Africanist presence," the epistemically relational and categorically choked shadow of the black folk in literature produced by white men in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States.[32] By the same token, representations of Dadeh and Sorur are acts of epistemic violence, exerted through middle and upper class discourses of feminism, which consolidate Iranian womanhood in relation to a subordinate Other.[33] As I have suggested and proceed to demonstrate, Amirshahi's fictional universe is a site of creative conflict between Qadam-Kheyr's fateful predicament and Sorur's life-affirming resilience, between the former's plight and the latter's redemption. In the next two sections, the reading of the novel centers on the ethnocentric discourse that initially delimits Qadam-Kheyr's hyphenated identity, but which ultimately provokes the minor character Sorur to outlive Dadeh's alterity and rewrite her destiny as an African-Iranian woman at large.

Qadam-Kheyr Unbound

"Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr," the narrator informs us at the outset of the novel, "was a child slave whom Baba-jan Ashaq Mirza presented to his daughter Mah-Taban from amongst the hundred slaves he had bought on the way to Mecca" (*DQ* 8). This moment of business transaction, with Mah-Taban and her future daughters at the receiving end of the exchange, is the beginning of narrative time as Qadam-Kheyr knows it.

Qadam-Kheyr's *past* is the *history* of her masters, a fact that renders the individual not necessarily powerless but essentially ahistorical. The opening chapter of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is an exposition of the character as an ex-slave-cum-matriarch, or a

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domestic servant with authority within, but not without, the household. Qadam-Kheyr differs from her fellow domestics in that, firstly, her existence is entirely limited to that of the women she serves. This is a precarious position for the displaced woman who has chosen, both out of love and necessity, to remain with her owners well after the abolition of slavery. At a time when Mah-Taban has passed away and Mah-Monir is about to leave, the stream of Dadeh's consciousness is fed by "the memory of bygone days to escape foreboding tomorrows" (*DQ* 8). Ironically, the utter dependence of Qadam-Kheyr on her lifelong owners is the second, and more intriguing, reason why she stands out amongst the other servants. By virtue of her maternal proximity to Mah-Taban and her daughters, which is the role she assumes as their "*madar-e sani*" (alternate mother [61]), Qadam-Kheyr is the most privileged of the household servants, who enjoys unprecedented if limited authority over her mistresses. "For when Dadeh was in a temper," the narrator brags, "her wrath knew neither superiors nor inferiors" (8). While this sense of relative freedom cannot justify the benign treatment of the former slave, it certainly reveals the extent to which Qadam-Kheyr is integrated into the host society of Persians.

For a marginalized woman with limited means for agential autonomy, Qadam-Kheyr has too readily embraced the classist ethos of her masters. It is not only that she never questions the problematic roots of her beginnings in Iran, she even derides relatives whom she finds unworthy of socialization with Mah-Taban's children. Gossiping about the family's in-laws, Qadam-Kheyr's condescending tone is characteristic of her vernacular. Invoking "*Khaqan Maghfur*" or Fath Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797–1834) as the great ancestor of the family, she cries out: "Beware Your Royal Highness! Rise from the dead and see your sons-in-law of all caste and colors!" (*DQ* 13). Targeting another relative named Shokuh, a sickly and battered woman, Dadeh is upset that "the bald and penniless" Shokuh should, of all people, be her mistress' sister-in-law: "*Ba shekam-e gosneh, arogh-e fandoqi!*" (proverbial: being poor and smug [97]). Following Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial "mimicry," the tendency of the former slave towards her masters' classism, despite her own victimization, is the end result of "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, *but not quite*."[34] Regardless of her comfortable sphere of domestic influence, Qadam-Kheyr is ultimately left behind to rue the past and resent the in-laws while the rest proceed with their private and public lives. Describing Mo'ayed al-Eslam, the family's eldest son-in-law, the narrator notes that "unlike Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr, the past did not seem to preoccupy Mo'ayed as he was rather concerned with the current affairs of the nation" (24). This social dynamic distinguishes the novel's cast of characters, men more so than women, from Dadeh's existential stalemate and obsession with bygone days without a clear sense of her biological roots. It also highlights her historical and textual marginality despite being the title-character of the novel. Qadam-Kheyr may be allowed to deride underclass Others in her social interactions, but she is never granted full access to aristocracy or the opportunities available to the emergent middle class. As the domestic guardian of polite society, she is Persianized or almost Persian, *but not quite*.[35]

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In chapter five, Qadam-Kheyr takes a stroll in central Tehran. What she encounters in the nation's capital, a city in the throes of Pahlavi modernization in 1941, is drastically different from what she once knew as a slave girl. As she walks by the Museum of Ancient Iran, the post office and the police headquarters, she is witness to an array of centralized institutions that are symbolically supervised, farther on, by the panoptic "statue of the cloaked Reza Shah on horseback, erected right across the Majlis" (*DQ* 58–9). Just as confounding to Dadeh is the flock of men in top hats and women without veils as emblems of Pahlavi-era cosmetic reform, moving about in the hustle and bustle of congested Tehran (59). What is ironic with these geographically and architecturally distinct passages is that the symptoms of Qadam-Kheyr's fatal disease—*maraz-e jo'*, the attack of intense hunger followed by eating disorder—begins to surface during this morning stroll. In the belly of the urban space that is furnished to form the thriving body of modernized Tehran, the expiring figure of Qadam-Kheyr feels like an alien: "She could not even set foot in a restaurant on her own. How could she have known the customs of dining out?" (64). When she does finally muster up the courage to buy some figs, a streetwise man lurking in the grocery store mocks her exotic features with a xenophobic nursery rhyme. Questioning the black woman's intrusion, the young man dances, twirls, and sings: "Darkie, darkie! / Don't come over! / Lest you upset / Our bride!" (66).

Qadam-Kheyr strikes back with an articulate slap on the face, sending him home "with one hand wiping his tears and the other rubbing his cheek" (*DQ* 67). But what remains intact, despite Dadeh's dormant strength, is the disturbing humor underlying the binary opposition between her foreign "blackness" (*Sia, sia!*) and the presumed whiteness of the native "bride" (*Khuneh ma naya! / Aroos darim / Badesh miad!*). While this opposition, as suggested in the previous section, may not directly translate into racial ideology, it does demarcate the boundaries of an urban public space from which Qadam-Kheyr, the former slave, is excluded. In chapter ten, for instance, we catch a glimpse of Tehran's mid-century cultural scene as one of the family's grandchildren, Mehr-Banu's son Amir-Mas'ud, attends a stage play at the Officer Academy. As he enters the theatre, which is host to a nationalist play, Amir-Mas'ud finds "the cat-like map of Iran hanging off the stage wall while standing next to it was a bosomy, blue eyed, and blond haired woman holding a torch as the nation's mother" or "*mam-e mihan*" (130). This performative, and indeed comical, appearance of *mam-e mihan*—or the "geobody" of Iran "envisaged as the outlines of a female body: one to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect"[36]—not only plays on the semiotics of Pahlavi nationalism. The projection of the body politic as a presumably white woman is also indicative of a "dislocative" brand of nationalism which, as Zia-Ebrahimi noted, aspires to be as Caucasian as they come.[37] Such embodiment of the motherland as a white woman is, on the surface, an inconsequential attempt at racial passing. Yet on a deeper level, with regard to the African Other of the Persian narrative voice, the ideological refashioning of Iranian femininity through a Eurocentric aesthetics of beauty cannot embrace Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr's gendered, classed, and raced body since the black woman is markedly neither "blue eyed" nor "blond haired."

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Amirshahi is, of course, at her satirical best in laying bare the absurdity of the racialized *mam-i mihan*, sending Amir-Mas'ud's friend up on the stage to raise a ruckus and ridicule the pompous propaganda of the performance. Throughout the narrative, however, any form of social function that subscribes to the notion of centralized *vatan* (homeland) is bound to alienate Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr with or without authorial consent. An interesting example is a dialogue between Mehr-Banu and Mah-Tal'at as the sisters discuss an invitation they have received, as women of high society, to the anniversary of the controversial unveiling of women enforced by Reza Shah in the winter of 1936.[38] Discussing if they should attend the state banquet at "Baharestan," the reception hall of the Majlis, Mah-Tal'at suggests they should first go hat shopping in "Lalezar," a posh high street in early modern Tehran (*DQ* 77). As Minoo Moallem argues, the 1936–41 unveiling of Iranian women, coupled with the Europeanization of men's attire in this period, led to such "gendered and racialized notions of state-initiated modernization" that would constitute "an important site of both gender and national identification."[39] Accordingly, the interlocking sites of the state banquet and upscale boutiques of Lalezar, in vogue under the shadow of Pahlavi hegemonic masculinity, make a fashion statement that inevitably excludes Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr, the dehistoricized former slave, from the category of modern Iranian womanhood in the narrative world.

Even if Qadam-Kheyr is granted partial autonomy in the domestic sphere, being cherished as a surrogate mother who "tends by nature to rule rather than be ruled" (*DQ* 74), her ultimate exclusion from the body politic renders her predicament doubly oppressive. Qadam-Kheyr is a victim of patriarchy just as Princess Mah-Taban and her daughters have been. Yet, as a result of her liminality as an African-Iranian woman who is only partly Persian, Qadam-Kheyr is positively dehumanized when it comes to the recognition of her individual rights. Towards the end of the novel, a family meeting is held to address two issues, Mehr-Banu's insistence on getting a divorce from her abusive husband, and the problem of Qadam-Kheyr's continued disrespect for Mo'ayed al-Eslam, the eldest son-in-law. As the family engage in debate, they treat Mehr-Banu as an individual (whose claim for divorce rests on the patriarch's approval) but deem Qadam-Kheyr an object of value (with no inherent right other than to fulfill her domestic and maternal duties). The fates of both Mehr-Banu and Qadam-Kheyr attest to the overall subordination of women to men. But whereas the former is given the opportunity to recast her life as a divorcee, the latter is held in check by the descendants of those who displaced her in the first place. Qadam-Kheyr, the meeting concludes, cannot be evicted from the household because the old nursemaid deserves reluctant tolerance. Mah-Tal'at, for one, agrees that Dadeh is a "keepsake" (*yadegar*) from her mother who cannot be let go, "like the door of a mosque which one may neither burn nor throw away" (196). Qadam-Kheyr is thus objectified as a sacred relic that embodies not necessarily a human being but a family tradition worthy of respect.

With 1940s Tehran as the scene of her social death, it is not far-fetched for the reader to expect Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr's physical death to shroud the denouement. At the end of a difficult night in chapter fourteen, during which course she is bedrid-

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den from the symptoms of *jo'*, Qadam-Kheyr wakes up after a strange dream. She has dreamt of a deceased close relative, Hajiyeh Khanom, who was singing to her a *chavosh-e zavvari* (the pilgrim's calling: a song recited to encourage Muslims to holy places of pilgrimage). In the dream Hajiyeh Khanom addresses Dadeh and calls out: "I sense the enticing scent of Karbala" (*DQ* 175), referring to the site of pilgrimage in present-day Iraq where Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was slain by the ruling Umayyad Caliph in 680 AD. Attracting Qadam-Kheyr to Karbala, the de facto site of Shia martyrdom, is a foreshadowing of the character's declining health and ultimate demise in the remaining pages of the novel. Going back in time to the anonymous slave girl who was bought into "being" Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr during her master's pilgrimage to Mecca, Hajiyeh Khanom's *chavosh-e* Karbala contains the story of Qadam-Kheyr's life and death in full circle, from one holy expedition to another confined in a Perso-Islamic household without making the slightest reference to the character's African roots.

As she lies dying, Qadam-Kheyr falls into delirium, a state of mind that further reveals the gravity of her ahistorical condition. The statement made in the opening chapter, that "[t]he world of Qadam-Kheyr was limited to the house of the Princess" (*DQ* 8), gains more significance in the closing chapter, for the succession of events that flash before Qadam-Kheyr's eyes towards her last breath never precede the moment of transaction in the slave market. The chapter begins with the sweet memory of Soleyman, a runaway slave for whom the youthful Qadam-Kheyr felt "tender and poetic affection" (244). Bound to the domestic sphere, we then hear about her unique "intimacy" with her first mistress Mah-Taban, pure "love" for her last mistress Mah-Monir, and unattached "lust" for a fellow domestic servant Dada Sadeq (244–6), all men and women who preoccupy Qadam-Kheyr's near-death experience. In face of the Persian narrative voice, of course, I find it odd to suspend my disbelief of the fact that mere seconds before passing on, Qadam-Kheyr fails to conjure up any event whatsoever from her earlier days in or about Africa. What we learn instead, through the omniscient narrator who fondly speaks for the title-character, is that the world of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is that of a "sea voyage" entirely devoted to Mah-Taban's children. The romantic conception of Qadam-Kheyr's image as the "fierce and proud" captain of a ship, "whose authority was too manifest [*ashekar*] and her self-sacrifices rather latent [*mastur*]" (247), neither reveals the hardships of forced labor migration to Iran, nor does it address the absolute unknowability of the black woman's original name. From what is said and left unsaid by the half-reliable narrator, Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr is an emotionally expressive and domestically assertive emancipated slave, who remains partly autonomous but eternally displaced.

Sorur at Large

Sorur, the daughter of black servants Sa'id and Nur-Saba, is a minor character whose presence in *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is limited to a few chapters only. Her appearances might be passing and not crucial to the course of action, but Sorur's ambitious vitality

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in pursuit of happiness, as opposed to Qadam-Kheyr's suppressed strength in captivity, reveals the glimmer of hope in the racial politics of the novel. Advocating the insurgent power of subordinate characters in realist fiction, Alex Woloch writes that on the "polycentric" canvas of the novel each character bears "a unique (perhaps unelaborated) experience within the story and a unique (perhaps submerged) perspective on the story."[40] Beyond the "fixed discourse" that controls the uneven distribution of characters in the narrative proper, Woloch suggests that through the unheard voice of the minor character, "narratives themselves allow and solicit us to construct a story … that is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed pattern of attention in the discourse."[41]

In the last page of the novel, moments before Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr breathes her last, news arrives that in the chaos of Tehran blockade during the Allied invasion Sorur has managed to leave the capital in order to begin her new life in Qazvin. If Qadam-Kheyr as protagonist constitutes the tortured center of the text, the minor character Sorur occupies its telltale margins as she, borrowing Woloch's words, "enfolds the untold tale into the telling."[42] The daughter of former slaves, Sorur is to begin with haunted by a childhood memory that reeks of the family's fear of miscegenation. When she was eight, Sorur's father Sa'id Soltan fell madly in love with Mah-Taban's sister Mah-Manzar. The specific account of the doomed romance, having ultimately led to Sa'id's tragic suicide, is wrapped in mystery as the omniscient narrator is reluctant to disclose details of the affair. What we read instead is, initially, the horror in Sorur's eyes when she first found "the half-naked and lifeless body of her father" in the vicinity of Mah-Manzar's private quarters and, more importantly, the resentful tone of Qadam-Kheyr's words in memoriam. As the mouthpiece of the ruling class ideology, deeply conscious of the taboo of interracial intimacy within the household, she blames the unorthodox Mah-Manzar "whose breath burns anything into ashes" (*DQ* 149), and then bemoans the loss of Sa'id Soltan who could possess "any young slave and domestic" but chose instead to "fall for the Princess" and should as a result face the music "six feet under!" (154).

What is more troubling, as reminisced in book four, *Mehr-Olia's Self Reflections*, is that years later Sorur gets married to a local man who is just as terrified of having a black offspring. "*Asbab-e bi aberuyi bud!*" (it would have been cause for disgrace), thinks Sorur's husband, who forces her to visit an abortionist and deal with her unwanted pregnancy only to realize, at the end, that the dead fetus has "white skin, milky white skin."[43] Such traumatic incidents, suppressing non-Persian and coded non-white femininities and masculinities, put Sorur in the same boat as Qadam-Kheyr and Sa'id Soltan. In contrast to her predecessors, however, Sorur is the woman to ultimately defy her fate by daring to dream a world beyond the domestic sphere. In the few passages that center on Sorur, she is strong and passionately at work to leave Tehran and start anew in her childhood home of Qazvin. I have already noted how Sorur resents the civic chauvinism prevalent in the Iranian capital, seeing it as an "inglorious city where a bumpkin [*shahrestani*] is always a bumpkin and a black [*siah*] always a black" (*DQ* 149). In search of a more just and equitable alternative—the northern city of Qazvin to her mind—Sorur yearns to over-

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come her ancestors' predicament of upward mobility by moving to a place where "the color of her skin would no longer be an anomaly," a new environment that may enable her to finally be a part of "respectable society" (149). In chapter twelve, the single episode in the novel to fully externalize the minor character, Sorur begins to prepare for the journey ahead by opening a "metal casket" of memorabilia she has cherished for years:

> The metal casket that Sorur kept on the mantelpiece was her treasure chest. Anything she had held dear to her heart had a place in this box: a diploma from six years of elementary school; a photograph of Sa'id Soltan [her father] and Sardar Mofakhkham [the current family patriarch] under the hazel tree; 970 Tomans of savings; a typewriting certificate; eleven gold coins she had collected in family weddings; proof of employment in the ministry of culture; a gold necklace and a turquoise ring; three letters from Mehr-Olia in Kermanshah, and the title deed of the house which Sardar Mofakhkham [the owner] had bestowed on her father Sa'id [the slave]. (*DQ* 146–7)

As the narrator looks into the treasure chest, producing a detailed inventory of its contents, the reader is also encouraged to rummage through Sorur's belongings, and in the process hear the character's voice in face of past hardships and future uncertainties. Based on the arrangement of objects in the casket, Sorur could be seen as a literate woman with a healthy sum of savings, skilled and educated enough to land a job with the government, and fully capable of breaking into public life with a clear set of ambitions to pursue in Qazvin. Her relationships with the family elite, in addition, are established along more egalitarian lines. As suggested here and evident through their friendship, Sorur's bond to Mehr-Olia, Mah-Taban's third child and perhaps Amirshahi's alter ego in *Mothers and Daughters,*[44] departs from the dynamics of Qadam-Kheyr's maternal bond to Mah-Monir, which ultimately denied the surrogate mother her potential for agency. By the same token, if Sardar Mofakhkham, the magnanimous patriarch that he is, chose to bless Sa'id Soltan with his property, the legality of Sorur's claim on the title deed through inheritance rather than benevolence differs from the master and slave dialectic determining the fate of her father.

The organization of Sorur's life achievements gains more significance should we think of the contents of Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr's own casket, and imagine what telltale objects it may have contained. In the very chapter that opens with Sorur's casket of memorabilia, we also read about her childhood memories when Sorur and Mehr-Olia would mess around Qadam-Kheyr's "*sanduq-khaneh*" (box cellar), where she kept her personal belongings (*DQ* 147). Interestingly, Qadam-Kheyr and Sorur do not have a direct relationship, nor do they ever engage in dialogue. Yet what the comparison of Sorur's actual achievements with the imaginary contents of Qadam-Kheyr's box cellar proves is that Sorur is a resourceful woman who is resolved to outlive former slaves, older masters, and the grand narratives that have essentialized them as underclass subjects and benevolent patriarchs. To return to my earlier question, "What's in a

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Name?," the word *sorur* translates as gaiety and cheerfulness, and not unlike Qadam-Kheyr's relational etymology the name-bearer is meant to be a harbinger of joy to her masters. Yet on a more hopeful note, which is characteristic of Sorur's ambitions and Amirshahi's subversive fiction, the Persian transcription of the name (سرور) may also be pronounced "sarvar," meaning a ruler or chief and connoting an individual with sovereignty over her fate. If, then, the good-omened Qadam-Kheyr was named *for* Mah-Taban to serve her lot of Persian slaveholders, Sorur has been named *by* her own parents so she may not only bring joy to her surroundings but also rule her destiny in pursuit of happiness.

Sorur's departure from Tehran coincides with the Allied occupation of Iran and the death of Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr. In the closing scene—where Mah-Monir, Nur-Saba, and a family physician gather round Qadam-Kheyr's deathbed—the telephone rings to bring news of Sorur's arrival to Qazvin. As Nur-Saba leaves to answer the call, the narrator takes us past the open curtains of the window to view the clear sky, that "wide blue yonder which was so pure the heavens seemed unaware of us earthlings, oblivious to the occupied land of Iran or the proximity of Qadam-Kheyr's death!" (*DQ* 255). That the firmament is indifferent to either incident may or may not be the case. What is irrefutable, and foreordained by the Fates, is the exact juxtaposition of Sorur's journey with the death of Qadam-Kheyr in a society that is on the verge of historic change. By a leap of the imagination, I suggest that Sorur, the black woman at large, is about to witness and possibly participate in a range of national and global watersheds that would shape the destiny of Amirshahi's cast of characters, from the fall of Reza Shah at the end of book two to the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution throughout book four.

What I have termed an "aesthetics of alterity" at the epicenter of *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* precisely echoes the peripheral emergence of Sorur as an autonomous character, despite the exhausting centrality of Qadam-Kheyr as the disenfranchised protagonist. At once paradoxical and creative, the aesthetics of alterity is a discursive and narrative mode that marks the visibility of such Iranian characters as the descendants of Mah-Taban, and the invisibility of the African-Iranian folk as non-Persian Others. The ensuing narrative world, as I have attempted to demonstrate, is a site of struggle with two opposing outcomes where it not only leads to the fateful alienation of Qadam-Kheyr but also galvanizes in Sorur the potential for self-determination. Ultimately, Amirshahi's play on the erasures that characterize the history of Iranian slavery leads to a third space in which to articulate the poignancy and immediacy of the issues of minorities, from ethnic and sexual to economic and religious, in contemporary Iranian society and culture.

The denouement in *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr* is only partly shrouded by the title-character's death, and is more significantly redeemed by Sorur's passage to Qazvin. Of course, textual evidence scattered in subsequent volumes of the tetralogy reveals that neither of the characters in question may be regarded fully emancipated from physical and structural violence. Dadeh, a painful void in Mah-Monir's psyche in book three, gradually fades into oblivion and turns, by the middle of book four, into the nickname of a black cat in the reminiscences of the demented Mehr-Olia;

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and Sorur, as noted above, ends up with an abortionist, as a victim of racism and domestic abuse.[45] Yet from within the brief passages that unfold against the grain of Qadam-Kheyr's fate, Sorur emerges as an African-Iranian who has ventured to begin anew. In between Dadeh and Sorur, one finds the creative conflict between two equally viable forces at play in Amirshahi's work, namely the aesthetics of alterity that eradicates the historical roots of the former but ultimately foregrounds the latter as a minor character with a major story to tell: a proleptic narrative that recounts, potentially in a fifth volume of *Mothers and Daughters*, the story of Sorur's life and livelihood in Qazvin.

Notes

1. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 52. On the 1928 abolition of slavery, see Floor, "Trade in and Position of Slaves," 258. The abolition of Iranian slavery, as Floor demonstrates, occurred in a period of seventy-seven years beginning when Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96) put Iranian slave ships under scrutiny until after the Constitutional Revolution when the Majlis declared all Iranians equal before the law in 1907, and officially banned slavery in 1928 (257–8). My early emphasis on the abolition act of 1928 is to suggest that upon the inception of the plot in the early 1940s, the reader may assume Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr already emancipated, hence my frequent use of the phrase "former slave" in descriptions of Amirshahi's protagonist.
2. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 52.
3. Ibid.
4. Floor, "Trade in and Position of Slaves," 257, 263.
5. Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, 152.
6. Floor, "Trade in and Position of Slaves," 263.
7. Amirshahi, *Dadeh Qadam-Kheyr*, 248 (hereafter cited in text as *DQ*). According to the Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary, "*sia Barzangi*" is a racial slur that connotes an "uncultivated" and "uneducated" black slave who is "prone to base desires." While the word "barzangi" is, literally speaking, characteristic of the city of "Barzang" in Azerbaijan's region of Aran, the production of the racial slur "*sia Barzangi*" could be an attempt to localize and familiarize the origins of slaves who were imported from Zanzibar. *Parsi.Wiki*, s.v. "Barzangi," accessed May 14, 2017, http://www.parsi.wiki/fa/wiki/topicdetail/e55e1cc6b85f4af09e1ae866c8d24023
8. Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, 150–1; Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 53–4. The list of European travelers who commented on the state and condition of slaves in Iran, cited by Martin and Afary, include Johnson, *A Journey from India to England*, 12; and Sykes, *Persia and Its People*, 68, who in fact described Iran as a "paradise" for slaves.
9. Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, 151; see also Floor, "The Trade in and Position of Slaves," 255.
10. Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 53–4.
11. Martin, *The Qajar Pact*, 152.
12. Even the term "Afro-Iranian," as Beeta Baghoolizadeh contends in "Picturing the Other," may fail to fully capture the complexity of life as experienced by former slaves and their descendants in Iran, for the term "imposes a hyphenated identity on a community that has no corresponding term in Persian and is not generally used by members of the community." Whereas I continue to use the term "African-Iranian" to historicize the textual presence of two black women in Amirshahi's work, I remain wary of the identity politics underlying the inorganic application of the term and will in my close reading of the novel continue to ask, following Baghoolizadeh, "where does the Iranian begin and the African end?"
13. Mirzai, "African Presence in Iran," 235–8.
14. Milani, "Mediatory Guile of the Nanny," 200.
15. Ibid., 186–7.

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16. Motlagh, *Burying the Beloved,* 62–3.
17. Ibid., 64.
18. See n. 7 above.
19. Southgate, "Negative Images of Blacks," 3–4.
20. Kermani, *Seh Maktub*, quoted in Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation," 454.
21. Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation," 468.
22. Ibid., 469; emphasis in original. "The Aryan myth," spanning from the early nineteenth century until after the fall of Nazi Germany at the end of World War II, "divides humankind into several races, and considers most Europeans, but also Iranians and Indians, as members of the Aryan race" (447). For an extensive discussion of what Zia-Ebrahimi terms "dislocative nationalism," see his *Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*.
23. Amirshahi, interview by Erfan.
24. Amirshahi, "Women from the Perspective," 895–900.
25. Mir-Abedini, *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi*, 714.
26. Ibid., 408–9, 731–2.
27. Motlagh, *Burying the Beloved*, 65.
28. Ibid., 65.
29. Anthropologist Pedram Khosronejad has been working on a visual archive of the African-Iranian presence, focusing on the photographic record of black domestics in elite households of the Qajar period (1789–1925). For an overview of Khosronejad's forthcoming work, see Hassanzade Ajiri, "African Slavery in Qajar Iran." See also Khosronejad, *Untold Stories*, for the significance of visual anthropological research towards a fuller understanding of socio-cultural life during the Qajar era.
30. Amirshahi, interview by Erfan.
31. Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, xi.
32. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 17.
33. Motlagh, *Burying the Beloved*, 62–3.
34. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85; emphasis is mine.
35. Ibid., 89–90. I am here drawing upon the distinction Bhabha makes between "being English and being Anglicized," describing "the anomalous representation of the colonized" as a position beyond the realm of historical agency.
36. Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 98.
37. Zia Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation," 469.
38. Chehabi, "The Banning of the Veil," 193.
39. Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother*, 65.
40. Woloch, *One versus Many*, 41.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 42.
43. Amirshahi, *Mehr-Olia's Self Reflections*, 145–8.
44. See Amirshahi, interview by Erfan, where the author claims she "has put bits and pieces of her own existence in the final book" and in particular "the character of Mehr-Olia."
45. Amirshahi, *Shahrbanu's Honeymoon*, 98, 224; and *Mehr-Olia's Self-Reflections*, 32. See also Woloch, *One versus Many*, 41.

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