

CULPRITS IN COLLECTION: ETHNIC VICTIMIZATION IN BELLIGERENT CONDITIONS IN
JUMPING OVER FIRE

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ABSTRACT

The paper studies how inter-national political relations affect the relationship between the citizens from the respective nations through Nahid Rachlin's novel, *Jumping over Fire* (2005). The novel portrays the exacerbating relationship between the Iranians and Americans in Revolutionary Iran. Taking the novel as the point of reference, the paper explores the ways in which in belligerent situations, collective identities, such as one's nationality makes the citizens of one nation vulnerable to the attacks of people from the other. Thus, the paper unveils and discusses the political nature of human identities taking the cue from Rachlin's narrative.

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One of the news lately topping the front pages of the major dailies across the globe is the latest updates on the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Syria and her ongoing battle with the Sunni fundamentalist group, ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Visuals of repeated U.S. air raids in Iraq and the consequent beheading of two American journalists by members of ISIL, in association with live on-site reports, have been jam-packing the slots of every other national and international news channel worldwide since early July 2014. The world has once again been made the awed spectator of some horrifying acts of manslaughter engineered to avenge the "wrongs" done by their country of origin. Once again innocent apolitical human beings have been made to pay the price of their nationality. Incidents of this kind (whose instances abound in human history) point to one of the strangest paradox of human life--while people spend days and nights trying to build their identity as an individual, more often than not, it is our communal identity--national, regional, religious, linguistic, class-based and caste-based (in case of India)--which "defines" us for the world around and determines the kind of treatment we are likely to receive from those in whose category we do not belong.

But that is not all. What actually decides the way an individual is likely to be looked upon (and hence, treated) by another is the history of relationship maintained between the communities they represent. Again that history, pleasant or unpleasant, often gets revised in the light of some emergent situation which might push the communities into a new power-relation. All these factors taken together determine the kind of baggage a person from a particular community is likely to bring in while interacting with one belonging to another. However, it is this last stated situation which eminent Iranian author, Nahid Rachlin explores in her

novel, *Jumping over Fire* (2005)--a situation in which (adversely) changing relationship between two nations affects the way in which the immigrants from the "enemy nation" is treated in each of the two nations at war. The nations in question in this novel are the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the United States of America the relationship between whom embittered ever since America tried to meddle with the political, economic and military affairs of Iran during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (r.1941-79). America's interest in Iran was originally stimulated by the discovery of petroleum reserves in Iran (1908) which ultimately culminated in a situation where King Mohammad Reza became a puppet in the hands of the American government in exchange for military support. The U.S. president had begun to function as the decisive authority in matters relating to administration, economy and military affairs--a situation which sowed the first seeds of discontent amongst the Iranians.

The mounting feeling of repugnance towards America in Iran took a dramatic turn with the coming of Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (1902-89) who in a speech delivered on November 5, 1979 described America as the "Great Satan" and an enemy of Islam for its benefaction towards Israel and thereby imparted a communal color to the political discontent (Buck 136). The projection of America as a religious offender immediately lent a mass significance to an otherwise issue of imperialistic practices and unprecedentedly amplified the prevalent sense of apathy towards the Americans in Iran. The repercussions of such a development at the level of the general populace are enumerated in Rachlin's novel. The novel achieves its purpose by taking the Ellahi family as a case in point. The ethnic constitution of the family makes it a fitting specimen to study the degenerating relationship between the Iranians and the Americans at the given point of time. The Ellahi family comprises of an Iranian doctor, Cyrus Ellahi; his American wife, Moira; their Iranian-American daughter, Nora, the protagonist, who resembles her mother in her skin and hair color; and her adopted brother, Jahan, the son actually born to Dr. Ellahi out of his one-night-stand with Shirin Sohrabi, a woman then working as a technician in a hospital in Shiraz. The novel narrates the plight of this Iranian-American family from Masjid-e-Suleiman which is faced first with the rising tide of hatred towards the Americans in Iran and then the consequent anti-Iranian fervor in contemporary America where they eventually flee to escape the situation in Iran.

The novel delineates the grim socio-political reality that when two or more nations enter into a relation of enmity, the immigrants from one nation begin to be perceived as the representative, or rather a stand-in for the home country and, therefore, a deserving recipient of all such assaults and ill-treatments which should "ideally" be directed towards the country to which s/he belongs. The political dispute between the countries (a political entity), thus, in no time gets transmuted into a war of the *nations* where individual citizens take it upon themselves to act as self-appointed avengers on behalf of the country and lock horns with every other member of the "enemy" nation they encounter. History bears evidence to the fact that international political conflicts have more often than not been followed by such situations of ethnic friction which develop as a parallel crisis.

What makes the Ellahi family all the more susceptible to the ensuing communal animus in Iran is the fact that it is not only hetero-ethnic, but also, if we may say, heterochrome. While the father and son are typical non-white Iranians, the mother and daughter are blonde Americans—complexions which act as ethnic badge for them. Her mixed ethnic identity becomes the primary dilemma for Nora, confusing her as to which culture to embrace. While Nora is tempted to enjoy the limitless individual freedom afforded by the American culture, the conservatism, typical of the culture in Iran, not only holds her back from living by her choices, it gets her actions judged as symptomatic of the cultural dissipation, typical of America. Nora narrates her feeling of discomfort thus:

The ultra-conservative Muslims who lived here resented the presence of Americans and the English, because they were a constant reminder of the Shah's embrace of what they considered to be materialistic and immoral. They thought that these foreigners, *farangis*, were spreading vice. . . . Soon I became aware of critical glances for not covering my head. (3-4)

An otherwise innocent, personal choice of dress code, thus, comes to attain a political overtone in the culturally conservative, racially intolerant and politically charged climate of Iran. Nora's friendship with Trinka,

one of her schoolmates, slackens for the latter's father objects to his daughter's intimacy with a girl, who "doesn't pray or wear a head scarf" (27).

Nora's adopted brother, Jahan, a complete Iranian in blood and appearance, on the other hand, is free from any such identity crisis. Jahan has a natural attachment to and appreciation for his native culture. Having been born as a male in an Islamic patriarchal society, he is intrinsically blessed with all the freedom of movement and action that is denied to Nora, due to the Iranian-half of her identity. Jahan, therefore, never suffers from the sense of inadequacy and disgust that keeps growing in Nora towards her paternal culture—a culture, she constantly yearns to get away from.

However, Nora, who already feels the obligations of being a woman in the sexually discriminatory culture of Iran, soon has to start paying for the American-half of her identity. The constantly accumulating grudge towards the immigrant Americans begins to send currents of tension along the social fabric of Iran: agitations amongst Iranian workers at the oil refinery for being paid less than their American colleagues; the growing annoyance amongst native merchants, impoverished by escalating demand for foreign goods that flood the market; and, to top it all, the cultural imperialism resulting in cultural contamination which flouts the moral precepts of the Holy Faith. It is an evil which the devout Iranians can never compromise with. Rachlin provides a snapshot of the exacerbating situation through a day's episode that Nora encounters at the Pahlavi Square:

A man on a platform bellowed through the microphone: "We have to weed out foreign vices. We have to put an end to nightclubs where foreign women in scanty clothes dance and where liquor flows like water." . . .

The man on the platform said, "There are 150,000 Iranians in this town. There are more than 3,500 Americans and English combined, but they act as if they own Masjid-e-Suleiman. They steal our oil and give us nothing".

A few people shouted, "Go home oil eaters!" . . .

"We have suffered oppression for too long, it's about time to put an end to it. We must unite", the man on the platform shouted, his voice rising to an even higher pitch. "We will drive out the blue-eyed, blond-haired exploiters". (67-68)

The avowed animosity between "we" (the exploited Iranians) and the "blue-eyed, blond-haired exploiters" finds an immediate prey in Nora, the "blue-eyed, blond-haired" half-American girl who stands there as a spectator. Consequently, while she is half-way down the alley Nora gets assaulted by a couple of young boys who pelt stones at her and abuses her in filthy language for being a "*faranghi*".

What deserves attention at this point is how certain socio-economic grievances against the government are avenged through racial discrimination and victimization at the level of the ordinary humanity. While the American exploitation of Iran's oil reserves had a major bearing on Iran's economy, and naturally infuriated the Iranians against America's policies as a nation (for details, see Keddie), the situation begetted an attitude of virulence towards the Americans residing in Iran who were viewed not just as representatives of the enemy camp but as perpetrators of depravity. The anxiety of threatened ethno-cultural traditions, therefore, merged with economic disaffection and escalated anti-American demonstrations from the level of mere verbal censure to that of corporeal threats in forms of sexual harassments, kidnaps and assassinations. What is particularly distressing is the fact that the sense of national consciousness forged by a larger socio-economic concern "authorized" every Iranian to assume the role of a national hero and assault the "sinning" Americans in the interest of his country and her people. One might say that the larger political rivalry becomes a mere abstraction in this regard. Its sole manifestations are only as instances of individual combat. Such situations confirm the fact that no social/political phenomenon can ever be conceived in its entirety apart from its ramifications at the level of the masses.

However, the incident quoted above is just a prologue to the saga of xenophobia that is to unfold in no time, as Nora says, "And so our idyllic private life was being swept away" (72). What begins as anti-Americanism soon spreads like a forest-fire, awakening every section of the society to clamor for their rights—the factory workers, the slum dwellers, the democratic reformers, the nationalists, popular citizens' groups, student unions, the Marxists, anarchists, religious moderates and religious fundamentalists. Graffiti, such as

"*Marg be English! Marg be Amrika!*" (meaning, "Death to the English! Death to America!"), sweep the walls of the streets in Iran. Therefore, the anti-American sentiments amongst the oil field workers served as an eye-opener for the other sections of the society to nudge the government for the redressal of their respective grievances. The awakened feeling of betrayal further facilitated the project of indiscriminate victimization of the innocent American and English immigrants who became the off-hand targets of communal violence. Persecution of the American and English people in Iran thus became a means of mass retribution against these nations as also the pro-Western Shah.

Historically, as stated already, the idea of cultural contamination was reinforced with the appearance of Ayatollah Khomeini who drew the attention of the Iranians to the religious, and hence, communal dimension of the problem. The part played by the advocates of religion in further fuelling this racial intolerance is enumerated in Rachlin's narrative through such instances as that on the day of *Ashura* (the tenth day of Muharram), the muezzin from the Azimeh Mosque sermonizes:

Angels are deserting our town because of all the vices plaguing it. We have to pluck out the weeds of sin—wine, beer, the infidels. The foreigners have made our cities into nests of sin. . . . Let not the life of the world beguile you. (74)

The invocation of religion, which constitutes an integral element of communal identity, is the most effective trick to trigger communal friction. So religion is precisely played on by the reactionaries headed by Ayatollah Khomeini in Revolutionary Iran to beguile the agitated Iranians and, thereby, consolidate their preponderance in power. A fight for economic and civic rights is, thus, given the religious coloring of a crusade against impiety and preservation of cultural exclusivity which becomes a moral obligation for all "good Muslims" to fight. Soon the struggle between the native and the imperialists is magnified to a fight for preservation of virtue against the vicious.

What followed, historically as also in the novel, as consequences of this scenario were intermittent closures of schools, the replacement of the national anthem with religious prayers for the school assembly, the introduction of compulsory religious education into the curriculum, the mandating of headscarf for the girls in the school premises and an elimination of the English courses from the syllabus (Borjian, 70). A return to religion was, thus, preached to be the antidote to the "vice" spread by the Americans and the British. A retrieval of the native culture in its pristine form was thought possible only through the revivification of indigenous traditions, which in an Islamic society, are largely intertwined with religious customs. Islam in such circumstances was, therefore, upheld as the cultural paradigm of the nation.

Ayatollah Khomeini's ascension to power was marked by the enforcement of a set code of conduct for the civilians—wearing the *chador* (the cloak-like dress in dull monochromatic hues which was mandated by the state for every Iranian woman to wear over the regular dress) and abstinence from all forms of sensual pleasures—as an immediate corollary to the change in political values. Reports of mysterious killings and kidnappings, especially of those on favorable terms with the Pahlavi regime and who refused to subscribe to the Khomeinist principles became an everyday reality in post-Revolutionary Iran. The latter group included the Jews and the Armenians who came to be counted amongst the polluters of national (Islamic) culture (Keddie 48).

The volatile circumstances which serve as the backdrop of the narrative is conjured up by Rachlin through recurrent references to such instances as the closing down of synagogues, the theatres screening foreign movies, and outlets, such as the Maloney Bookstore which carried English language books, Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's--incidents whose historical equivalents are not difficult to find. Fire is set to a gift shop belonging to a man with an American wife as also to a nightclub that featured foreign dancers and singers. The situation was, therefore, veering to a point where the rampant feeling of communal disdain fuelled by the passion for piety ceased to remain restricted to the Americans and the English and directed itself towards any community other than the Muslims. Once a particular religion was hailed as the defining parameter of national culture, the followers of other cults were inescapably branded as deviants to the established order. The spirit of xenophobia became so acute that it compelled the English and American families to flee Iran for life.

Soon comes the turn of the Ellahi family to escape as Dr. Ellahi's name appears on two of the lists pasted in the Imam Ali Mosque, titled, "The Friends of Americans" and "The Shahis". In Khomeinist Iran, people like Dr. Ellahi, married to an American woman and recruited by the Shah, came to be counted amongst the prime enemies of the nation. The situation, therefore, demands a rupture in their life, requiring them to leave a treasured part of their lives back in Iran—Moira, her hard-earned collection of rare Iranian carpets; and Jahan, his prized works of art, along with other valuable pieces of furniture and bric-a-brac—ensembles which were accumulated through years of sustained passionate efforts.

After they are smuggled (since they are on the *Kharej Mamnoon* or "No Exit Allowed" list) to the United States via Dubai, they reach and settle down in the U.S. with the help of the Catholic Charities who help them get an unassuming apartment free for the next four months till their money arrives from Swiss Bank account. However, in America, hardships of different kinds await them. The Ellahi family is confronted with adversities at three levels—economic, cultural and racial. Bereft of all their treasures, the four Ellahis try to fight the acute economic stringency in their own ways: while Moira works as a "floating" nurse in a hospital, Nora gets herself a part-time job in a local library; Jahan manages to become an apprentice to a carpenter while Dr. Ellahi devotes himself to the remedial course for his licensing exams which he is now required to qualify in order to practice as a physician in America.

Finance is, however, not the only problem the Ellahis have to wrestle with. Exiled from their homeland, they are faced with all the discomfiture of being immigrants. One of the most serious challenges is at the level of the language which particularly troubles the father and the son who lack the required communicative competence in English. In order to help Jahan develop fluency in spoken English, Nora insists that the two should begin to communicate in English instead of in Farsi as they did in Iran. It is only then that the two realize that language is an aspect of one's mental make-up, more integral to the personality than they believed. English, a foreign language, proves inadequate to express the emotions that was bred and hitherto nurtured by Farsi. In no time, culture begins to assert its claim, in all its dimensions.

The American culture with its emblematic unmatched limits of social permissibility and individual freedom brings out the essential difference between Jahan and Nora. Believing Jahan to be her adopted (and not real) brother, Nora and Jahan had already entered into a romantic relationship. However, their location in a different cultural climate now makes them realize the fundamental difference in their cultural values. Nora, who always yearned for a pan-American lifestyle, rejoices at her dreams coming true. But the American culture, with its characteristic superficiality and materialism makes Jahan miss his native cultural ambience all the more intensely. Jahan's confrontation with an essentially contrastive culture thus further strengthens his sense of cultural identity and regards for it. Thus, while Nora gets engrossed in erasing the last trace of her Iranian identity and celebrating her new American self, Jahan increasingly feels an unprecedented pull towards his native culture. Naturally, the rift between the two begins to widen irrevocably.

Nevertheless, culture can never be dissociated from community. Rather, it is the very basis of one's communal identity. Certain aspects of human identity—such as, national, racial and cultural—are notions which get infused into the human psyche through years of indoctrination. Once imbued, they stick to one's personality as indelible imprints and invite related consequences. Every race/nation/community/ethnic group exists as an *image*, laden with presumed attributes, in the minds of every "Other". It is this "image" stocked in the minds of every individual about every "Other" which serves as the protocol in every inter-ethnic interaction.

However, Edward W. Said says that the images, and hence, the dynamics of interactions between the "Self" and the "Other" are not static but dynamic entities. They continue to remain in a state of flux and change their forms in response to the varying degrees of external pressure acting on them in different combinations at different points of time (332). Thus, in the face of the degenerating relationship between the IRI and the U.S.A, Jahan, being an Iranian in America, is faced with similar ethnic victimization as Nora had experienced in Iran. While it is never an issue with Nora, with her light complexion and blonde hair, to become inconspicuous in the crowd of American teenagers, Jahan is singled out at every step as an Iranian. Even his artwork comes to be branded as "too Iranian" and unreflectively dubbed, in consonance with the prevailing political scenario, as "anti-American".

Historically, the antagonism between the two nations reached its climax with the Hostage Crisis of November 1979¹--a brainchild of Ayatollah Khomeini. Rachlin portrays the repercussions of the incident in America. The Americans retaliated with equal vehemence, expressing their contempt by caricaturing the Iranians as barbarians in the American newspapers and graffiti, evacuating the diasporic Iranians from their homes and beating up students from the Iranian schools.

Quite in line with the case of Nora in Iran, in America, Jahan comes to be perceived as not just an "Iranian", but rather a member of the "enemy" camp and, therefore, a mass target of attack. Interestingly, Jahan soon undergoes an experience strikingly similar to what happened to Nora in Iran. Nora narrates the incident thus:

I came across Jahan standing at the top of the stairs leading to the Allan Hall when a student came up and confronted him. "You're Eye-ranian, aren't you!" he accused.

Jahan ignored him.

"You're keeping our men prisoner". (Emphasis added)

Another boy joined them. The first boy, putting his hand on Jahan's back, said to the other boy, "This is Ayatollah Jahan." The two of them burst into mocking laughter.

Jahan blushed but tried to turn it into a joke. He said, "I'll take you hostage if you don't watch out."

The first boy shouted, "Go home, Eye-ranian, go back where you belong." (126-127)

Once again, political identity comes to color individual identity as nationality begins to define selfhood. The larger political conflict at the international level, thus, resonates at the level of individual interactions. Ill-treating the diasporic citizens of the "enemy" nation becomes an "individual act of revenge" for inter-national political disputes for every citizen. In other words, a war of the nations, thus, gets reduced to a clash amongst the respective citizens at an individual level.

Interpersonal frictions continue to mount in proportion to the vaulting political tension. After Jahan, it is the turn of his friend, Assad, to fall prey to ethnic victimization. Assad is accused of sexual harassment by Gail Van Kamp, one of his American batchmates at St. Paul's College. Though Assad gets cleared of the false charges levelled against him, the two incidents irrevocably alter their perspectives towards life. Apart from wiping off the last trace of regard for the Americans, the incidents laid bare the Americans' growing spirit of vengeance towards the Iranians aiming to persecute them as a people. What follows as a reflex action to such realization is a frenetic urge to guard the integrity of Iranian culture before the Americans.

No Muslim community (regardless of the nation-specific cultural variations) can be conceived in separation from the basic Islamic ideologies which forms the core of Muslim culture. Moreover, keeping the contemporary Iranian political scenario in mind, one should not forget that the war against imperialism had long transmuted into a crusade for safeguarding the cultural integrity of the people. Preserving the cultural traditions of an Islamic nation necessarily involves a revivification of Islamic virtues which largely form the moral paradigm of the Muslim people. Driven by the passion to preserve the dignity of Islam and the Iranians in America, Jahan teams up with Assad and his gang from the Blue Mosque and takes to preaching the verities of Islam. They together begin a programme of regular prayer and assembly at the Mosque. Jahan distributes pamphlets bearing Islamic injunctions in the college (an activity which brings Jahan under the disciplinary gaze of the college administrative authorities) "to correct the image of Islam" which, he thinks, "is used as a tool of prejudice among Americans" (171-172). Thus, Jahan, in spite of being an individual not brought up with pan-Islamic values, is compelled to endorse the principles of Islam, not just to rectify the international image of

¹The Hostage Crisis was a tactic of Khomeini to get rid of the Bazargan government which endeavored to improve political and economic relations with the United States. When Americans persuaded President Carter to allow entry to the Shah for his treatment (cancer) from Mexico, the SFLI attacked and seized the American embassy in Tehran, taking the officials hostage and destroying the documents. Khomeini's support for the SFLI only exacerbated the situation. He utilized the incident as a pretext to weaken the moderates, the anti-Khomeini *ulema* and, thereby, get the new constitution passed. (Keddie 248-249)

Islam, but also to justify the political choice that his homeland has made by embracing Islam as the administrative basis of the nation.

At this juncture, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1981-88) further exacerbates the situation. The news of relentless drafting of youngsters to the front in Iran (which includes Jahan's cousins, Mohsen and Hassan) further stirs the nationalist sentiment in Jahan. His consciousness of his identity as an Iranian, which has only recently been reinforced by the pervasive anti-Iranian sentiment in America, compels him to return to serve his nation. The novel closes with Jahan settling down in Shiraz with his biological mother, Shirin, while the Ellahi family continues to live in America. Jahan, crippled in one leg (wounded in the War), gets engaged to Ziba Kiani, a former student of Mostafahi High School where Jahan now works as a teacher since his discharge from the army.

Rachlin's narrative is, thus, a study in the politics of human identity. She dismantles the notion of identity as an individually determinable personality tag and demonstrates that identity in most cases is an inherent or imposed social image which, in turn, comes with its own share of consequentiality. Taking Revolutionary Iran's estranged relationship with the U.S. as the case in point, Rachlin further demonstrates the highly political nature of human identity. Identity issues are invariably contested on the anvil of a power relationship which determines the dynamics of identity formation as also the kind of treatment to be meted to the person/s in question. It is our identity--national, racial, ethnic, religious and communal--which decides our lot in more ways than one. It is these collective identities which subjects us to the dis/favor of those in whose camp we do not belong. Moreover, in cases of socio-political conflicts, such collective identities invite collective treatment--every single human being belonging to a certain target community are looked upon as a representative of that community and, therefore, victimizing any of them is perceived as an act of revenge against the entire community. The guilt of a handful of people, therefore, gets attributed to every member of the community in question and qualifies them for the kinds of treatments befitting the real offender/s.

This phenomenon explains the outbreaks of communal violence. Cases of communal violence are the most perfect examples of indiscriminate mass assault done to avenge the wrongdoings of a few members of the community under attack. Therefore, be it the Gujarat Riot (2002) or the massacre carried out on the Direct Action Day (August 16, 1946) in Kolkata, genocides have been repeatedly conducted in human history on the basis of people's national or communal identity. Focussing on the popular outcomes of the Iran-U.S. antagonism in Revolutionary Iran, Rachlin's novel exposes this intriguing feature of human identity.

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