At a time when the Iranian government figures prominently in mainstream media for its foreign policy and nuclear program and when a diversity of voices and perspectives is lacking in the West, it seems pertinent to engage with artistic and literary works that offer more nuanced depictions of Iranian society than are generally available. In the face of predominantly simplistic and monolithic representations of Iran as a repressive, profoundly patriarchal, and politically intractable nation full of religious fanatics imbued with a hatred of the West and prone to terrorism, Iranian artists reveal a very different society, one whose cultural traditions are rooted in a lengthy and complex history that sometimes sit uneasily with the demands of modernity. The artists under consideration in this volume engage with Iranian culture and Western responses to Iran in two ways: their works question the strategies—and in some cases, the ideology—that have been imposed internally on Iranian society, and they challenge the new Orientalist discourse that defines the character of Western conceptions. The essentialist approach of Western media, governments, and even financial institutions that underlies their responses to an Islamic government demonizes Iranians in Iran who have no say in the dealings of the government, as well as Iranians in diaspora with no ties to or interest in political matters.

The artists represented in this collection tackle a range of issues in response to internal and external constructions of Iranian identity, or hoviyyat. The question of identity is at the heart of Persian literature and was central to classical Persian poetry, which is essentially spiritual in nature. In the poems of Attar, Jami, Rumi,
and Hafiz, to name just a few, the central theme is a spiritual quest, the goal of which is to gain proximity to the Beloved. The first requirement for the individual on a spiritual quest is to “annihilate his ego (nafs) and become selfless. . . . It is only after he has divorced himself from his material needs and the worries of his own existence and the world that the seeker can approach the Divine” (Mannani 162). The annihilation of nafs, as well as the ongoing Manichaean tensions between the demands of “heart and mind” and “body and mind” that are the defining characteristics of the not-yet-unified Self in Sufi poetry, prefigure modern conceptions of the fragmented Self. In classical poetry, the spiritual quest ultimately culminates in a unified Self, while the modern Self remains divided and insecure.

Spirituality, once the defining characteristic of Persian poetry (which was, until recently, the pre-eminent genre of Persian literature), has partially given way to more secular preoccupations in modern Iranian literature. As Ramin Jahanbegloo argues, “the conflict between traditional and modern understandings of the relationship among religion, state, and society” has dominated the Iranian intellectual agenda particularly during the past decades (15). Tradition and Eurocentric modernity collided following both the Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) and the 1979 Islamic Revolution in particular and distinct ways, as each encounter was inflected by the specifics of its historical moment. The Constitutional Revolution introduced Western modalities of thought, and this political change was subsequently reflected in social and cultural narratives.² Subsequently, the anti-imperialist Islamic Revolution vehemently opposed all Western values and thoughts. Over the past three decades, the Iranian government has been adamantly, but unsuccessfully, pursuing its anti-Western principles and imposing strict conformity to religion. The widespread embracing of a Western lifestyle among most Iranians, especially the younger generation, and the 2009 Green Movement illustrate the failed attempts to excise Western influence. This apparent infatuation with Western culture exists in juxtaposition with a nostalgic pride in Persian tradition. Perhaps no critic has identified this duality and the arising complications better than Dariush Shayegan, who, in Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West, delineates the underlying contradictions in Iranian society and the way in which Iranians are caught between the desire to be “modern and archaic, democratic and authoritarian, profane and religious, ahead of the time and behind it” (22). In his 2011 monograph, Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran, Kamran Talattof takes the issue to a higher level and explicates the reasons behind Iran’s failure to achieve modernity in its Western denomination.
He proposes the use of a different “approach,” which he calls “modernoid, or resembling modernity,” to clarify why “its culture has become unstable, changing constantly in a chaotic fashion” and consistently lacking “a modern conceptualization of sexuality” (9).

Within Iranian discourse, *modernity* remains a fluid term. Although there is no consensus among scholars of Iranian studies about the precise implications of modernity, it is still important to be aware of the distinctions that have been made among its various derivatives. Talattof has identified various definitions of the concept: “‘modernity’ proper as an epochal or historical category; ‘modernité’ as a state of mind and being or a human experience; ‘modernisation’ as material development, industrialisation, or development in technology and economic relationships; and ‘modernism’ as a realm of cultural and aesthetic values and practices” (22). Babak Rahimi, too, has described “modernization” as a “restrictive set of socioeconomic and state policies for ‘modernizing’ a perceived ‘backward’ society, in contrast to ‘modernity’ as a broad interpretative and institutional field of contention with multiple historical trajectories on a global scale” (451). Abbas Milani has added his voice to the debate. Modernism, Milani argues,

refers to a moment of aesthetic renovation—where form was content. Modernization is an attempt to buy piecemeal into the modern age (and is usually concurrent with the attempt to maintain some form of authoritarianism). Modernity, on the other hand, is an organically inter-related series of changes in the economic, political, spiritual, epistemological and aesthetic domains. It begets secularism and democracy, rationalism and individualized aesthetic and spiritual realms. It expands the private domain and catapults politics to the public domain. ("Said Amir Arjomand" 578–79)

Moreover, Abbas Milani contends that “rationalism and the rule of law,” ideas considered “modern” today, and the quest for “human ideals like democracy and freedom,” as primarily secular notions, have occupied the minds of Persians for more than a thousand years, and certainly “long before the Renaissance in Europe” (*Lost Wisdom* 9). Milani, à la Sohrab Sepehri, speaks of the importance of “washing the eyes” and “removing the dust of custom and old beliefs” from them in thinking that modernity is essentially a Western, Eurocentric concept. In the face of the demonization of Iran in Western media, Milani reminds us of the opulent and wide-ranging cultural legacy of a country that has had a decisive role in shaping Western consciousness. His comprehensive overview starts with
the Bible—specifically, the book of Ezra, which is “replete with profuse praise for Persia and its kings,” primarily Cyrus (Lost Wisdom 11–12). Milani then carries on with a detailed discussion of the dominance and influence of Persian progressive thoughts and beliefs on Western consciousness until the long and complicated encounter between Iran and the West in the nineteenth century. He discusses the impact of Zoroastrian, Mithraic, and Manichaean concepts on Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian thought systems; on the natural and human sciences, including philosophy, geography, mapping, medicine, historiography, mathematics, architecture, and linguistics; and on some prominent figures of the Western tradition such as St. Augustine, Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare (12–20).

Concurring with Hans Blumenberg, who defines modernity as “a secular form of critical cultural Gnosticism,” Milani lists a wide range of important Persian texts, such as Rumi’s Mathnawi and Beyhaqi’s historical narratives, as “a rich repository of the very ideas that have been assumed ‘Western’ since the nineteenth century” (18). “Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries,” Milani argues, “many of the ideas we now consider the quintessence of modernity—rationalism, secularism, individualism, urbanism, limited government—began to evolve in Iran and helped shape a naïve ‘Renaissance’” (18). He specifically mentions three Western philosophers and critics—Hegel, Nietzsche, and Harold Bloom—who have noted the importance of Persian and Zoroastrian thought on Western consciousness. For instance, in The Philosophy of History, Hegel states:

Persians are the first Historic people. . . . In Persia first arises that light which shines itself and illuminates what is around; for Zoroaster’s ‘Light’ belongs to the World of Consciousness—to Spirit as a relation to something distinct from itself. We see in the Persian World a pure exalted Unity, as the essence which leaves the special existences that inhere in it, free; —as the Light, which only manifests what bodies are in themselves; —a Unity which governs individuals only to excite them to become powerful for themselves—to develop and assert their individuality. Light makes no distinctions: the Sun shines on the righteous and the unrighteous, on high and low, and confers on all the same benefit and prosperity. . . . The principle of development begins with the history of Persia. This therefore constitutes strictly the beginning of World-History (173).

While recognizing the precedence of notions such as “democracy” in Persian culture, Milani takes note of the universal nature of these concepts and warns of
any misapplication of these discussions by supremacist, nationalist, and religious zealots (20–21).

In a similar vein, many historians and gender theorists have indicated that the causes of modern transformations within Iranian society cannot be limited to external factors. In probing the history of interactions between Europe and Iran, especially as it concerns cultural relations, Afsaneh Najmabadi asserts that these exchanges, which date back to at least the sixteenth century, played a profound role in transforming sexuality and gender in nineteenth-century Iranian society, although she insists that the “internal causes” cannot be ignored either (5). Najmabadi highlights the importance of remembering the “innumerable contingent events and concepts that transformed genders and sexualities” and the difficulty in making “a separation between internal and external developments” as they are progressively “intermeshed” at the turn of the century (5). In Najmabadi’s estimation, “much cultural hybridization was . . . mediated through the increasing interactions between Iran and the Indian subcontinent and the Ottoman Empire,” and “on the cultural level, more so than on the economic, administrative, and military levels, the interactions were a two-way street” (5). Inspired by the research of Mendus and Randall and that of Bleys, Najmabadi concludes that “just as this cultural traffic transformed Iranian gender and sexual sensibilities, European gender and sexual mores were also changed through interactions with other societies that Europe ‘discovered.’ . . . Neither Iranians nor Europeans invented themselves out of whole cloth” (5).5

Sexuality and gender inequality have been major components of the discourse on Iranian modernity and identity. In this predominantly patriarchal culture, some Persian women have played decisive roles in shaping the history of the country (Taghi 165–201; Kohl, Witt, and Welles 198). It is equally important to note that the patronizing view of most Iranian men toward women has an uneven and fluctuating precedence according to many historical accounts, including Herodotus’s *Histories*. Milani recounts history from the viewpoint of Herodotus, who, despite his estimation of the Persians as “barbarians” and “the other,” notes that Persian men took the seizure of their young women by foreign armies much more lightly than did their Greek counterparts, for whom their women were key constituents of their Greek “honor” (*Lost Wisdom* 14). The subtle differentiation that Milani is expressing here is the nonpatronizing attitude toward women at that time in Persian history, an attitude in explicit contradiction to that of the Greeks. Of course, throughout different historical periods and as the result of various
sociopolitical upheavals, Iranian women have gained, lost, and, in certain cases, regained some of their basic rights.

In Sexual Politics in Modern Iran, a study of the role of gender relations and politics in modern Iranian life, Janet Afary lays bare the persisting patriarchal norms in contemporary Iran, drawing upon Michel Foucault’s theories about societal controls exercised upon individual bodies (Foucault 103–11). In the same study, Afary invokes Erich Fromm, who delineates how the freedom from social hierarchies and the changes in social orders that came with the abrogation of the rigid class system in Western societies resulted in feelings of displacement, disconnectedness, and trauma by individual members of society (Fromm 123–29). Afary claims that the shift from a primarily agrarian to an urban lifestyle amplified similar feelings of displacement and insecurity, which Iranians were already feeling in the face of modernity (201). These factors all led to the embracing of Islamic values, which further perpetuated the patriarchal and patrimonial principles within Iranian society (201). Iranian women, who had made much progress following the Constitutional Revolution in claiming equal status and rights, saw many of these advances revoked after the Islamic government came to power.

Closely related to Afary’s study of gender politics in Iran are Nayereh Tohidi’s views. Tohidi approaches the issue from a sociopsychological perspective by outlining how Iranian men responded to modern forces. According to Tohidi, Iranian men alleviated the insecurity, anxiety, and helplessness they were feeling in the face of modernity by exercising even more power over their families, and especially over the female members of their families—that is, their wives, daughters, and sisters. These feelings of inferiority—in conjunction with the deeply embedded notions of gheyrat and namus, which define a man’s sense of honour in protecting the purity and integrity of his female kinship—compound the societal pressures experienced by Iranian women. These constructions and performances of gender circumscribe both women and men.

The tradition-modernity dialectic, which is central to modern Iranian identity, is encountered in the chapters in Familiar and Foreign and is embodied in a number of recurring motifs, such as alienation, exile, memory and history, geographic and linguistic displacement, liminality, loss and longing, gender and sexuality, and generational disparities. In addition to these motifs, the choice of genre, from confessional poetry to the graphic novel to film, deliberately reflects the collision of and resulting dialogue between past and present.
Iranians felt the bind between tradition and modernity acutely after 1979. The political situation, economic factors, and the increasing lack of opportunity for women, artists, and political dissidents to exercise their rights and express their views and opinions led many Iranians to leave the country, and many remain in diaspora. Diasporic identity is characterized by experiences of exile, displacement, and dispossession. As Gina Wisker writes, “For people silenced and dispossessed, writing back against that silence often involves the crucial need to explore and express history, and most importantly, the self.” She adds that “semi-fictionalized autobiography and life writing” have become “particular favorites of many women writers in response to the double experience of silencing” (164). Illustrating this trend, the past two decades have seen a sharp rise in the publication of many Iranian autobiographies that “write back against the silence” as a form of resistance. Among recent publications, the works of three Iranian women—Marjane Satrapi, Azar Nafisi, and Fatemeh Keshavarz—have drawn critical attention and are the subject of examination in several chapters in this collection. These narratives deal with a complex array of issues, the most important of which is the representation of women under the Islamic, post-imperialist regime. The memoirs have received a wide range of responses from both within and outside Iran, but most notably, from Iranian academics abroad who have questioned the legitimacy of exposing the internal weaknesses of the Islamic regime vis-à-vis the West through the sharing of personal stories and experiences. Abedinifard, Goldin, and Mannani attend to the nuances of self-writing, where confrontation with the Self is inevitable. In his article on Iranian autobiography, Abedinifard argues that Satrapi, in her two Persepolis volumes, “unveils the self” as a way of pushing back against the repressive measures, particularly as they apply to women, during the formation years of the Islamic Republic. In contrast, Mannani discusses how Keshavarz, in her response to Nafisi's memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran, reveals her internalization of the regimentation and censorship of the post-1979 state in her own self-regulated and self-censored memoir, in which an idealized Self is constructed. Similarly, Goldin, by examining the misogynistic use of selective hybrid words and idioms, maintains that Arabic has negatively impacted the Persian language and provides a comprehensive overview of Persian as “linguistically egalitarian” before the advent of Islam. Goldin’s evaluation of language extends to what she believes is an inherent discursive control of Iranian women’s life-writing.

The construction of Self is also problematized in the essays in this volume that focus on fiction. The common motif in these narratives is alienation, regardless of
whether the setting encompasses Iran or Europe or, in Goli Taraqqi’s case, both. The essays provide analyses of illustrations of an alienation that is twofold: the exilic alienation experienced as a result of geographic and linguistic displacement and what might be called “domestic alienation” within the realm of the home and family in Iran. Zoya Pirzad, as shown by Madeleine Voegeli, illustrates the complexities of establishing selfhood in a culture in which patriarchy is institutionalized. As Voegeli argues, the rigidly prescribed gender roles in Pirzad’s fiction strip both women and men of individual identity, leaving them estranged and empty within their familial milieu. Blake Atwood, too, probes gender roles, but his discussion concentrates on homoeroticism and homosexuality and on how the difference between the two within the Iranian context is informed by Eve Sedgwick’s notion of “homosexual panic,” which functions as a different way of “coming out of the closet.” What Atwood describes as the “failed emotional passage” of male characters into adulthood in the fiction of Alizadeh and Taraqqi and those writers’ reliance on two female characters (the two sides of the mother figure) explain the suspension of male characters’ “ascendance” to heterosexuality.

The exploration of exilic alienation is the subject of Babak Elahi’s chapter on Kader Abdolah’s My Father’s Notebook, where the motifs of spatial and linguistic dislocation figure prominently. As Elahi observes, Abdolah’s “novel is a metafictional account of a son’s attempt to translate his father’s notebooks from an unknown language into Dutch.” The essay analyzes how the cultural displacement of diaspora is mediated through the interplay between the language of the host country and a universal sign language—Abdolah’s father is both deaf and mute—and how “migration involves a transformation of self” through the narrator’s inability to use his Persian mother tongue to write. The use of sign language in the narrative is a communicative catalyst when the “home and host” languages are incompatible.

Laetitia Nanquette’s essay, too, explores exile as theme, style, and genre in Goli Taraqqi’s short stories. According to Nanquette, identity is redefined in the state of exile, where confrontation with the Other is mandatory. She uses Peyman Vahabzadeh’s theory that exile and immigration are not dichotomous in Persian literature to argue, in her analysis of the stories, that emigrants and exiles “have come to terms with their permanent conditions of alterity and foreignness” (Vahabzadeh 496). In the narratives that Nanquette studies, the protagonists embody varied stages of exilic experience, from the liminality of the newly exiled to the hybrid Self that incorporates both Western and Iranian values. Nanquette does note Taraqqi’s repeated use of the term Farang—the subject of Goulia Ghardashkhani’s essay,
which also examines Taraqqi’s short fiction. *Farang*, as Ghardashkhani explains, derives etymologically from the word *France*; however, over the years, the term has come to refer to “the West and Westerners” and “more specifically to the lands and peoples of Europe and North America” (Ghanoonparvar 2–3). In Ghardashkhani’s problematization of the concept, the signification of the word *farang* becomes dependent on the geographical location and psychological condition of the narrating subject. In other words, the meaning is multiple and spatially determined.

The motifs of history and memory are dealt with most fully in the articles on film. Khatereh Sheibani, in her analysis, explores how Bahram Beizai deconstructs and reformat “formal history” and “national identity.” After Sheibani’s acknowledgement of the *mellat-ommat* dichotomy, she dismantles these concepts to challenge the construction of history as a “monological, cultural explanation” in both its Iranian and Islamic accounts. She shows how Beizai’s films undermine the rigid lining up of historical events. Anselmi and Wilson return to Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, albeit the film adaptation by Paronnaud and Satrapi, and compare it to Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir*. They argue that both films “resist and subvert the history that is visually offered to us” in an effort to “reclaim different social memories . . . and reformulate individual identity paradigms in relationship to conceptions of national histories.” In foregrounding the complex relationship between film and television, Anselmi and Wilson demonstrate how both movies emphasize the fragmented Self.

It is important to note that only one essay in the collection deals with poetry despite the prominence of the genre in classical Persian literature and its ongoing importance. The small space that poetry occupies in this volume explains the positioning of Mohaghegh Neyshabouri’s chapter, which opens the book and elucidates the tradition-modernity collision that underscores the entire collection. This ongoing discord between past and present is reinforced by the subject of her chapter, which deals with the confessional work of Forugh Farrokhzad. As Mohaghegh Neyshabouri argues, Farrokhzad’s poetry demonstrates the struggle for Self “in the lives of progressive women artists of her generation.” In her poems, Farrokhzad expresses an individualized female Self defined against societal norms and expectations by presenting intimate details of female experience, a trend that remains nascent even four decades after her tragic death and, at the same time, reinforces our critical stance that tradition still exerts a powerful grasp on Iranian minds.

The essays presented here engage with the complex imbrication of the discourses of religion, patriarchy, and politics within the overarching paradigm of
tradition and modernity. The various and diverse depictions of Self presented by the artists examined in these essays indicate the ongoing construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of identity. These fictive narratives problematize the one-dimensional and shallow representations of Iranians that circulate unexamined in the West. Moreover, these films and literary texts not only challenge the neo-colonialist stereotypes but also reveal the limitations of collective identity as figured within and outside of Iran. Iranian identity as reflected in art, be it classical or modern, is informed by duality. A duality that was once metaphysical in nature has given way to a more politicized schism as a result of the country’s long, complex, and revolutionary history. The ongoing quest for equality for all members of Iranian society and the fight for personal and political expression remain among the many legitimate aspirations of the Iranian nation.9

NOTES

1 We have adopted the system of transliteration used by the journal Iranian Studies for Persian words and names, except in the case of proper names (such as those of cities) for which a familiar English spelling exists.

2 For more information on the Constitutional Revolution, see Afary, Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

3 Within the Iranian intellectual milieu, Milani believes, three separate groups of ideologues have fostered this essentially colonialist view: whereas enchanted Iranian secular intellectuals and most Iranian Marxists embraced Eurocentric and Western liberating and modern ideas, the religious forces that constituted the third group rejected them on the basis of their origin (Lost Wisdom 10–11).

4 “Cyrus, King of Persia . . . is often referred to as God’s ‘anointed’ and the ‘chosen’ ruler,” notes Milani, adding, “Cyrus was in fact the first ruler to issue a declaration of human rights . . . and the first ruler to create a truly multi-cultural empire by affording his conquered peoples the liberty to maintain their own linguistic, religious, and cultural autonomy” (Lost Wisdom 11–12).

5 Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, too, contends that “in the interplay of looks between Asians and Europeans, there was no steady position of spectatorship, no objective observer. . . . The field of vision and the making of meaning were perspectival, contestatory, and theatrical” (Refashioning Iran 36).

6 It is important to recognize that although today women are discriminated against by laws that govern institutions such as marriage, child custody, inheritance, and court testimony, they do have equal access to education (Mongabay). The World Bank reports that, in Iran, “[t]he female-to-male ratio in primary school is the world’s highest, with 1.2 girls enrolled for every boy. The number of women in secondary school as a percentage of the eligible age group more than doubled from 30 percent to 81 percent, and in 2009,
more than half of all Iranian university students, 68 percent of the students in science, and 28 percent in engineering were women” (60).

7 None of the works in this collection subscribes strictly to postmodernism proper. However, postmodernism resonates intensely with Iranian intellectuals because its irrationality evokes the same absence of rationality that is, in this traditional culture, deeply rooted in mysticism (Haghighi 10–12). Afshin Matin-Asgari suggests that as an “intellectual style,” postmodernism arguably has occupied the leading place that Marxism enjoyed in Iran a generation ago” (113). Nietzsche and Foucault, considered by many Iranians as pioneers of postmodern thought, were popular because of the former’s seminal work, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and the latter’s work on the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This popularity has extended to Heidegger, Lyotard, and Derrida, among others, whose “fashionable philosophical jargon” Iranian intellectuals like Babak Ahmadi use loosely without having a thorough understanding of the concepts behind it (Haghighi 276). Haghighi takes issue with writers like Ahmadi who argue that “all interpretations of the truth are equal… They have the same degree of credibility and are equally problematic” (279). In the words of Matin-Asgari, it is precisely this thesis that Haghighi opposes—seeing postmodernism as “a confused crossover between postmodern rhetoric and irrational tendencies of Iranian intellectual ‘tradition’” (114).

8 Mellat-ommat refers to a dichotomy between Iranians who share language and culture and Iranians for whom their shared religion of Islam takes precedence over nationality. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi argues that, in order to recover from historical and cultural amnesia, Iranians reinvented a pre-Islamic past, one in which Iran became “a lost Utopia with… Mazdak as a theoretician and practitioner of freedom and equality, Kavah-i Ahangar as the originator of ‘national will’ (himmat-i mellii), and Anushirvan as a paradigmatic just-constitutional monarch.” In what Tavakoli-Targhi describes as “a conscious effort to dissociate Iran from Islam and the Arabs,” it was argued that the veiling of women and polygamy were non-Iranian customs promulgated by the Arabs after the conquest of Iran. These “historical facts” were used rhetorically in the Constitutionalist discourse in order to project Iran’s “decadence” on to Arabs and Islam and introject the desirable attributes of Europeans on the pre-Islamic Self. This double process of projection and introjection provided mechanisms for the recasting of the millat and articulating a secular nationalist discourse and identity. The modernist dissociation of Iran from Islam intensified the Islamist desire to essentialize Islam in the constitution of Iranian identity. In the political struggle between Islamists and secularists in the twentieth century, the allegorical meanings of ancient history figured into the competing rhetorics of cultural authenticity. (“Contested Memories” 175; see also “Refashioning Iran” 77).

9 The editors would like to acknowledge Leila Pazargadi’s assistance in formulating the first call for papers that led to this publication.
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