



Patterns in Multicultural Young Adults Novels about Persian Culture

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Abstract

The disagreements among multicultural advocates over how to define the term “multicultural” have changed the question “What is multicultural children’s literature?” to “Who is or is not allowed to create multicultural literature?” This has led to the problem of multicultural literature being defined almost exclusively based on external elements, such as the ethnicity of the author or of the intended audience, rather than being based on its content. Since the term “multicultural” has been defined only loosely, what constitutes and distinguishes a multicultural book remains unclear. The purpose of this research was to examine how predetermined narrative elements—including character and characterization, plot, point of view, and setting—are used to qualify a book as multicultural. To that end, the study focused on the content of ten books for young adults about Iran that were originally published in the United States between 2009 and 2014 in American English and authored by Americans. Through qualitative analysis, the study examined to what extent one or more of these cultural codes have been used as narrative elements.

Literature Review

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term “multicultural” as “of or pertaining to a society consisting of varied cultural groups.” Regarding the origin of the term, the *OED* cites the first usage of “multicultural” in the *New York Herald-Tribune* in 1941;¹ as Dudek explains, in 1959 the *New York Times* narrowed and at the same time broadened the term “by connecting a culturally diverse city to cosmopolitanism.” He continues, “In 1965, the adjective ‘multicultural’ expanded into the noun ‘multiculturalism.’”² Although “the term multicultural children’s literature gained recognition in the late 1980s,”³ the interest in creating and evaluating multicultural children’s literature dates back to the 1960s.⁴ In addition to authors and illustrators, literary scholars as well as pedagogy and political science researchers have examined multiculturalism, enriching the field by contributing valuable insights. The interplay between children’s literature, sociopolitical concerns, and educational practices reveals multicultural children’s literature as “an aesthetic form of literary creation literature . . . a political

weapon in the cultural war, and an educational tool to change people's attitudes toward cultural diversity."⁵ How multicultural is defined by each discipline is influenced greatly by what the advocates of those groups want to know, learn, benefit from, and experience through multicultural books.

Regardless of whether the researchers from different disciplines agree on the definition of multicultural children's literature, they have recognized it as a highly political field. Adapting Terry Eagleton's ideas on literary theory to children's literature, Botelho and Rudman restate his viewpoints that "literature is a social construct that is historically, socio-politically, and discursively rooted in social ideologies that maintain power relations."⁶ Multicultural children's literature is a political, historical, and cultural product, portraying embedded ideologies. As Cai asserts, "The concept of multicultural literature requires that books in this category be treated, not only as literary works, but also as cultural products."⁷ It is impossible to read, analyze, and use the books only as artistic creations isolated from the context in which they have been created because "multiculturalism involves diversity and inclusion, but more importantly, it also involves power structure and struggle."⁸ However, whether and how literary elements in multicultural texts are different from literary devices in mainstream children's literature is a debatable question.

One of the most prominent critical arguments in multicultural children's literature is the authorship of insiders to a particular culture versus outsiders who are not from that culture. Discussions of cultural authenticity are highly related to the debates on who is allowed to create, study, teach, and evaluate multicultural books. Questioning outsiders who write about cultures other than their own, Alcoff believes that "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for." While Alcoff initially distinguishes the practice of speaking *for* others and the practice of speaking *about* others, later she maintains the idea that speaking about others is interrelated to speaking for them; thus "if the practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others." Normally, "who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens [are] a result, as well as an act, of political struggle."⁹ Similarly, Nodelman asserts that "in the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it. As long as we keep on speaking for it, we won't get to hear what it has to say for itself."¹⁰

Alcoff's and Nodelman's arguments recall Said's concern regarding the long history of Western authorship and scholarship as a tool of authority over the Orient. Said maintains that Orientalism cannot be defined as a pure political field "reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world."¹¹ Arguing against established Western views of the Orient, Said notes that some Western authors and scholars might be well-intentioned in writing about the Orient, yet their system of belief is deeply rooted in the Western consciousness and therefore is less trustworthy. As Cai emphasizes, "Good intentions do not guarantee that the implied author in [Western authors'] books will achieve the desired effects."¹² So the major concern is that, either purposefully or unconsciously, certain images, themes, and patterns appear repeatedly in multicultural literature, and through repetition they come to signify authenticity.

The dichotomy of the dominant and the dominated approaches to the subject of the insider-outsider debate requires that authors who write about the "other" culture create an accurate basis for the

position they assume. According to Sims Bishop, cultural authenticity is the extent to which literature reflects the worldview of a specific cultural group and the authenticating details of their language and everyday life.¹³ Further discussing whether mainstream perceptions of authenticity realistically represent “other” cultural points of view, Sims Bishop explains, “Judging authenticity is neither an exact science nor an objective exercise.”¹⁴ Those authors from the mainstream culture may create an appealing but inaccurate and distorted view of the other culture because cultural consciousness is different from high literary quality. However, it is noteworthy to remember:

There is no one-to-one relationship between ethnicity and accuracy or authenticity. It is a matter of sensibility and perspective. Problems do arise when writers do not adequately prepare themselves to bridge the cultural gaps between their own backgrounds and that of their subjects.¹⁵

Any culture is a dynamic community, which is continuously transmitting or reproducing itself. “If we are able to understand and appreciate what is unique about another culture, we cross borders of cultural differences,”¹⁶ Cai explains. However, it has never been more evident than in our time that a general understanding of a culture is insufficient for any type of authorship about that culture. Culture has been formed and re-formed countless times, and those who desire to write about any given culture must deal with its dynamic nature accordingly.

While it is not possible to “discount the cultural membership of the author,”¹⁷ the research on multicultural children’s literature would reveal more depth and insight if professionals in the field chose “to examine texts critically and to consider the complex social and political ramifications of the ways insiders and outsiders tell stories.”¹⁸ To enhance our understanding and skills as authors, critics, librarians, teachers, and readers of multicultural children’s literature, it is crucial to not always rely on the vantage point of insiders.

Although those who do not belong to white Anglo-Saxon culture are often less privileged members of U.S. society, they have a more privileged position in creating, evaluating, and teaching multicultural literature. Yet, unlike the insider, the outsider is less likely to gain access to the cultural truth and to know the cultural nuances intuitively. The significant disparity between the insiders and outsiders and the distrust of the outsiders’ writing disqualify them to engage with multicultural children’s literature. As a result, if only created from the point of view of insiders, the works of multicultural literature become secluded and one-dimensional. Attempting to examine the role of outsiders, this research includes only multicultural children’s literature created by outsiders to the culture depicted.

An Overview of the Study

The disagreements among multicultural advocates on how to define the term “multicultural” changes the question of “What is multicultural children’s literature?” to “Who is or is not allowed to create multicultural literature?” The problem, therefore, is that multicultural literature is defined almost exclusively based on its external elements, such as the ethnicity of the author or of the intended audience, rather than being based on its content. Since the term “multicultural” has been defined loosely, what constitutes and distinguishes a multicultural book remains unclear. The purpose of this research was to examine how narrative elements—including character and characterization, plot, point of view, and setting—were used to qualify a book as multicultural. To that end, in this study, I focused on the role of outsiders in creating multicultural literature.

In order to select the books, I searched for young adult novels that represented Persian culture, first published in the United States, in American English and authored by Americans rather than young adult novels by non-American, American-Iranian, and Iranian authors, published in Iran or in any country outside of the United States. I used the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD). The search keywords were "Iran," "Persia," and "Farsi," and limited to the category of juvenile fiction. "Persian" or "Iranian" refers to people from Iran, all the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau, or people of Persian descent.¹⁹ Both Iran and Persia are often used interchangeably to refer to the same country. Iran is the current legal name of the country, and Persia was an ancient kingdom. However, some people from Iran prefer the term Persian because it refers to the rich literary and cultural history of the country. Many dialects are spoken in the country, but the official language is Persian, or Farsi.

I examined authors' backgrounds through different volumes of the Something about the Author series and publishers' websites in order to authenticate their nationality as outsiders to Persian culture. Since the study started in 2014 and finished in 2015, I selected books published between 2009 and 2014. I further narrowed down my selection to young adult novels with no illustrations because I wanted to focus only on textual elements and not visual ones. I found ten titles that fit these qualifications. From these ten books, two fall within the genre of contemporary realistic fiction while the other eight novels are historical fiction.

Since the sample set of this study are children's books about Persian culture, a brief introduction to the history of Persian books for children and young adults is warranted. According to Ghaeni, children's literature in Iran can be traced back to ancient times, to nearly three thousand years ago, "when the first Persian families narrated rich oral literature."²⁰ Ghaeni refers to *The Asurik Tree* as the oldest Persian children's story, "a legend in rhythmic verse," which is a literary "debate between a goat and a palm tree"—two of the most common sources of food in ancient times. Through a debate between the plant and the animal, or between agricultural and animal-breeding industries, "the benefits of palm trees and goats are named one by one." Ghaeni further explains, "This kind of debate is based on the act of praising one's power and fighting skills."²¹ At the end, the goat wins since he is able to enumerate far more benefits than the palm tree. This simple story shows the richness as well as the importance of oral literature in ancient Iran.

Persian oral literature originated in ancient Iran and is of paramount importance for understanding the history of children's literature in the country. After the Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century, the Persian language lost its dominance when Persians started converting to Islam, gradually accepting and learning the script of the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims. As Sadeqi explains, "The profound influence of Arabic in Iran can be traced to its social, religious, and political significance in the wake of the Muslim conquest."²²

The Islamic conquest of Iran did not cause the Persian language to disappear or to diversify; however, a new Persian language called Early New Persian, influenced by both the Arabic and Persian languages, started to develop. According to Paul, the major distinctions between Early New Persian and the earlier version are the change of the script from Pahlavi to Arabic, in addition to many linguistic differences.²³

However,] unlike other ancient Near Eastern countries such as Syria or Egypt that were Arabicized as a consequence of Islamization, Iran kept a language of its own, partly preserved its

pre-Islamic cultural heritage, and thus laid the foundation for a later cultural renaissance that was bound to a language and identity separate from the Arabic one.²⁴

The slow but steady process of the importation of the Arabic language into Persian continued in a way such that “by modern times Arabic words had become such an accepted element in Persian vocabulary that they hardly seemed to be recognized as such.”²⁵ Purifying the Persian language from Arabic has been a common subject for many poets and scholars. For example, when Ferdowsi, one of the most influential classic poets of Iran, wrote, “Much I have suffered in these thirty years / I have revived the Ajam with my verse,”²⁶ he was specifically referring to the important impact of his book *The Shahnameh* (c. between 977 and 1010 CE) in the Persian world and his role as “the true resurrector” of an Iranian nation.²⁷ Within his masterpiece, Ferdowsi covers the history of pre-Islamic Persia along with the end of the Sasanian dynasty after the Arab conquest of Persia, all in verse. Ever since the appearance of *The Shahnameh*, many people have referred to it as the pillar of Persian literature.²⁸ Furughi describes Ferdowsi: “His emotions, his characters, his beliefs, his feelings as revealed his utterances, it’s exactly as though you were weighing the emotions of the Persian nation.”²⁹ In addition to Ferdowsi, three other most eminent and celebrated Iranian classic poets are Rumi, Sadi, and Hafiz; Arberry calls them “the four pillars of the Persian language and literature, the four elements making up the culture and national character of the Persian people.”³⁰

Knowledge of these poets’ composition is essential to an understanding of the characteristics of Persian literature. Certainly, there are many cultural nuances reflected in the poetry created by these four pillars of the Persian language. However, in this study I included only those cultural markers that are most identifiable. These cultural elements are (1) use of verse, (2) celebration of symbolism, and (3) the quest for a divine world. For this study, these cultural identifiers mark the representation of Persian culture as authentic. Admittedly, these signifiers might be different from what other researchers define as making Persian literature authentic. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this qualitative analysis, I examined to what extent one or more of these cultural codes have been used as narrative elements. The following discussion explains each of these three features and makes clear the significance and the relevance of each element in the context of the present study.

Use of Verse

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Persian culture is its glorification of poetry. The Persian custom of celebrating verse leaves very few different avenues for expression, even for ordinary people when they express their everyday thoughts. Arberry explains, “Most Persians possess the faculty of composing rhythmical speech; you will find very few indeed who will not on all appropriate—and sometimes even on inappropriate—occasions ornament their discourse with rhyme.”³¹ Firmly established is Persians’ national and personal aptitude for versifying almost everything. In short, “one might say that in the Persian view, speech without rhythm and rhyme is not worthy of attention.”³² Even occasionally what seems to be Persian prose tends to be read as a rhythmic text because of the repeated pattern of sounds. The presence of rhythmic patterns in Persian texts often affords the reader a deep sense of movement, like rocking a cradle. One of the most significant ways to acquire a better understanding of the common traits of Persians is to take their poetry and rhythmic text into consideration. To validate the authenticity of books about Persian culture, one of the most prominent examinations is to explore attention to verse and poetry in the text.

Celebration of Symbolism

Like a dazzling view of the Persian carpet that glorifies color, manifests creativity, and fascinates viewers, Persian poetry claims the foremost literary attraction and “provides the broadest stage for artistic and intellectual expression.”³³ However, Persian poetry has a very ambiguous nature and is not a transparent expression. Like a very small piece of glass or stone assembled purposefully and artistically in a miniature mosaic, an imperceptible “mythopoesis, the art of seeing through analogy,”³⁴ runs through Persian poetry. No matter what the theme is, symbolism and abstraction consistently appear in Persian literature. Yarshater writes, “The Persian poet is concerned more with subjective interpretation of reality than with its external manifestation.”³⁵ The “metaphoric consciousness”³⁶ of the poetry “allows a play of meaning, thereby opening texts to metaphoric and allegorical readings, as opposed to purely literal readings.”³⁷ To examine cultural accuracy and authenticity in multicultural literature about Persian culture, it is crucial to question if Persian symbols are used and retained within the text.

Quest for a Divine World

The quest for a divine world is the basis of much Persian literature and another distinct trait of writing style in Iran. There is a perennial interest within Iranian literature to look for divine light in every situation. Persian literature presents divine-human relationships “very often in a mystical vein.”³⁸ This tendency may take the form of “divine authority,”³⁹ the reliability of the supernatural, or the seeking out of moral virtues. A key point about the intimate association of a divine world with Persian literature is that literature transcends the supernatural as an everyday, embodied phenomenon. Therefore, an authentic Persian book is possibly one in which the quest for a divine union, along with purity of mind and heart, is set within the particularity of the events, characters, setting, and other literary elements.

Data Collection

To start the process of coding for this study, I collected bibliographical information for each of the ten books examined. Also, I read the books several times to identify major categories of narrative elements, including character and characterization, plot, point of view, and setting. The discussion proceeds with explaining these categories and their application in the context of this study.

Character and Characterization

This study was interested in examining how a protagonist handles a particular situation in the story, so the emphasis is on protagonists, including both Persian and non-Persian characters and their interaction with other characters.

Plot

This study viewed plot as the life trajectories and roles of protagonists. “The function of the plot is to reveal the character”⁴⁰ and to identify what significant event happens in what setting and with what character present. In terms of plot analysis, this study was also interested in those cases in which the plot proceeded through events and experiences not initiated or advanced by characters as humans but through other agents, such as natural disasters, magical experiences, spiritual experiences, divine will, poetry and story, and mass media.

Point of View

Regarding point-of-view analysis, this research was interested in the roles of insider and outsider, examining who viewed or expressed the storyworld. In the scope of this study, insiders were people of Persian descent including Iranian Americans, and outsiders were people with any ethnic background except Iranian.

Setting

Regarding setting analysis, this study was interested in identifying timing, location, and also a coherent sense of belonging to the habitus represented in the books. Exploring the various forms in which habitus appeared in the storyworld, the study examined whether the storyworld reflected insider or outsider habitus. The insider habitus portrayed Persian cultural identifiers such as (1) use of verse, (2) celebration of symbolism, and (3) the quest for a divine world. The outsider habitus showed other cultural identifiers that were not identified as Persian in the scope of this study.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, I analyzed young adult novels about Persian culture authored by Americans and published in the United States between 2009 and 2014. The following discussion reviews the emerged patterns and their implications for this study.

From Long Ago Genres

Analyzing the ten books for this study provided an insight into the types of young adult novels featuring Persian culture to which U.S. audiences are exposed. The genre of these books was usually reflective of an earlier setting and not a contemporary one, with only two titles in the genre of contemporary realistic fiction. These two books were *Gun Games* and *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*. Both of these books are set in the United States and have a contemporary realistic setting. They portray American culture, with minor references to Persian culture.

Among the other eight titles, modern settings were noticeably lacking. The eight books were all historical fiction, with time periods ranging from ancient Persia before and during the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BC), the Qajar time period in Iran in the 1900s, and one year before and after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. The overwhelming presence of books in the historical fiction genre and the scarcity of those in other genres indicated that it might be less challenging for authors to deal with an older Persia rather than present-day Iran in order to avoid initiating or triggering any controversial political debates. Also, another reason for the predominance of historical fiction compared to other genres may be that old Persia is a more exotic location than modern Iran for authors of multicultural books.

The gap between “then” and “now” is not limited to novels about Iran. Most current multicultural books portray older eras, such as unknown time periods in folktales, fairy tales, myths, and legends. For example, Yokota explains, “The mention of Asians in literature conjured up images from stories set ‘long ago and far away, in a land of exotic people . . .’ mainly because there was virtually nothing in print that addressed Asian Americans of contemporary times.”⁴¹ Although both traditional literature and historical fiction portray significant aspects of multicultural literature, they may not suffice because the “‘long-ago’ images result in misrepresentations of modernity and globalization.”⁴²

In addition to historical books about Iran, other genres such as contemporary realistic fiction and fantasy are equally important and needed. The depictions of ancient or olden times in Iran in the books for this study hardly resemble its contemporary reality. The historical representations are reflective of past lived experiences, but they fail to portray things like the changing status of women in contemporary Iran, including their appearance, rights, and roles.

Ethnicity of Characters

As Levinson explains, “Characters are key to multicultural literature. They must be believable and round, reflecting a range of attitudes and behaviors of human nature, with authentic representation of different cultures and motivations rooted in those cultures.”⁴³ Of the ten books in the study, four main characters were American and native English speakers, while two were Persian, one was Elamite, and three were Jews living in Iran. Reviewing the characterization in these books, three consistent patterns were revealed: (1) The main character was not Iranian but had a deep or brief interaction with Iranian character(s). (2) The main character was Iranian, and there was no non-Iranian character or interaction with non-Iranians. (3) The main character was not Iranian, and there was no Iranian character or any direct interactions with Iranians.

There were seven books that reflected the first pattern, where the protagonists were non-Persian characters who interacted with Iranians, and they portrayed Persian culture to different extents. Some books had protagonists, such as Jill in *Remembrance of the Sun*, who communicate deeply with Persian people; while other books, such as *Esther: A Star Is Born*, keep the Persian characters in the shadows. However, no matter the extent of the protagonists’ interactions with Persian characters, representations of Iran and Iranians are largely limited to the ideas advocated by non-Iranian characters, and therefore the diversity of Persian culture is not represented adequately. Within these stories, it is non-Iranian characters who have agency to make real change and who drive the action in the plot. However, there was one exception. In *Remembrance of the Sun*, American and Iranian characters are equally important to the plot; Jill, American, and Shaheen, Iranian, are portrayed with different layers of complexity and agency. Frequently, Jill aligns herself with Shaheen’s ideas, traditions, and culture. They are both involved in a believable conflict, facing challenges and solving problems. Their romance acts as a bridge between two seemingly disparate cultures. In contrast, in *Esther: A Star Is Born*, the lifestyles of Persian characters are not culturally specific; instead, they are overgeneralized and integrated into already existing negative connotations about Iran in contemporary media. By focusing too strongly on the differences between Jews and Persians, the book glorifies Esther but does not offer any genuine insight into the character of Ahasuerus, therefore failing to portray the human connections between Esther and a Persian king.

The second pattern is represented by books that are focused only on Iranian characters. *Anahita’s Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter* are representative of this pattern. The characterization in these two books reveals the importance of fearlessness and determination for young women to retain their dreams even under impossible circumstances. Through the process of designing and weaving Anahita’s carpet in *Anahita’s Woven Riddle*, the narrative evolves as a richly textured design to help decipher the unwritten nuances of Persian culture. The characters in both of these

books use poetry, riddles, and storytelling in their everyday conversation; their actions seem familiar, recognizable, and admirable. Within this category, there are Iranian characters such as Anahita and Arash who have distinctive perceptions and understandings of Persian culture. Their behavioral repertoire is representative of their culture, and the books' portrayals of their lifestyles are genuine, believable, and complex, not simplified or stereotypical. Both Anahita and Arash use speech that accurately portrays Persian language and customs. While one or two quality books like these may not address every need for diverse books in the United States, they are genuine efforts in "cross[ing] cultural gaps."⁴⁴

The third pattern is represented by those books with non-Iranian protagonists only. In my study, the novel *Zebra Forest* reflects this pattern. There are no characters from Iran or any other type of interaction with Iranians in this book. However, the American protagonist Annie often talks about the news concerning Iranians on TV. The book does not portray Persian characters or their behavior, only dealing with Persian people from a distance.

Among the three approaches to characterization in multicultural books for this study, the third pattern is the least effective in portraying Persian characters. In *Zebra Forest*, the American hostage crisis in Iran is a thematic parallel to events in the plot. However, having all the main characters as American and introducing Persian people only as a group of people on TV could cause overgeneralization. One of the most common pitfalls in writing a multicultural book as an outsider is generalization about non-American characters, which is an implicit form of stereotyping. When including people of different ethnicities in a book, it is essential not to make general judgments about them as a group. When we generalize about others, we are inclined to make false assumptions about them and treat them based on our imagined information about them.

Analyzing the books for this study, a new emphasis emerged regarding characterization in multicultural children's literature. It can be beneficial for multicultural books to follow either the first or second pattern as described in this study. The key factor in multicultural writing is to create a balanced portrayal of diverse characters, including mainstream and multicultural characters. A multicultural book should enable the reader to think about how a character in non-mainstream culture is portrayed, how other people are portrayed in contrast, and how characters from these two or more cultures interact. There is a need to have the widest spectrum of insider and outsider characters, to distinguish their differences, to understand their roles, and to see their relationships. After all, the ultimate goal of creating multicultural literature should be not only "the representation and celebration of cultural diversity,"⁴⁵ but also to genuinely connect with and empower individuals who are culturally different.

Harem, Bazaar, and Teahouse

The images of long ago Persia in the books for this study highlight some cultural identifiers that are rather misleading. One recurring cultural icon in these books is the harem. In Persian, "harem" means sanctuary and generally refers to a separate and private sphere in former aristocratic households. The word is also associated with polygamy and female seclusion in Muslim households. In the past, the residents of the harem had different ranks and roles, ranging from mother, wives, concubines, sisters, children, and

servants including eunuchs. Due to the ambiguous, private, and secluded nature of the harem, most of the information about its lifestyle is imaginary and not factual. The concern revealed in analyzing the books in this study was the frequent appearance of the harem.

The harem is mentioned in half of the books for this study, ranging from 132 times in *Esther the Queen: A Novel* to 77 in *A Reluctant Queen: The Love Story of Esther*, 45 in *Night Letter*, 34 in *Esther: A Star Is Born*, and twice in *Anahita's Woven Riddle*. While it is quite understandable to represent the harem as a part of the setting in long ago Middle Eastern stories, its frequent appearance in multicultural books may result in perpetuating stereotypes. It should be noted that the purpose of including this discussion here is to invite authors of multicultural books to not simply focus on only one setting and therefore overlook opportunities to portray other settings.

On the other hand, there were valid references to two other cultural components that are traditional but still common in present Iran: the bazaar and the teahouse. The bazaar was explored substantially in several books, including 64 times in *Remembrance of the Sun*, 16 times in *Night Letter*, and 13 times in *Anahita's Woven Riddle*. In particular, within *Remembrance of the Sun*, the bazaar was not merely a place for buying and selling goods, but it was also a cultural sphere, reflective of Iranian lives, traditions, and values. The architecture of the bazaar in Iran has many long corridors, with each one housing different kinds of imports and exports. The structure is old but very intriguing, wondrous, and elusive. Bazaars still exist as significant and dynamic institutions in present-day Iran. As Keshavarzian has quoted from one fabric wholesaler in the Tehran Bazaar, "Anything that happens in Iran can be captured right here [in the bazaar]."⁴⁶ Given the importance of this cultural sphere, authors of multicultural books who write about Iran should consider setting part of their stories in the bazaar.

In addition to the importance of the bazaar in Iran, another distinctive cultural institution with a long tradition is the teahouse. The teahouse is a place with its own culture, mainly used to serve tea, some light meals in addition to tea, and hookah smoking. In former times in Iran, a teahouse was also a place for oral storytelling and social interaction. Moving along the spectrum of traditional to modern, some Iranians have kept their teahouses while others have switched to modern coffee shops. Regarding the books in this study, Meghan Nuttall Sayres was the only author who portrayed this cultural establishment, in both *Anahita's Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter*. Although neither of these two books gives a full picture of the teahouse, they provide a brief taste of Iran and its traditions.

It is important for authors of multicultural books to identify and incorporate distinctive and meaningful cultural identifiers in their stories. These cultural components must be factual and not imaginary. Also, these cultural elements need to be contextualized with regard to the culture presented. The results of this study demonstrate that the prominent and perhaps defining features of a culture are those rooted in tradition along with contemporary values. In terms of the books for this study, the specific cultural components such as the bazaar and teahouse appear closely tied to the culture of Iran, while the harem can loosely be conceived as an authentic Persian setting.

Representation of Iranian Women

Throughout the analysis of the books for this study, it became necessary to elaborate on the portrayal of Iranian women. In total, eight books out of ten consistently introduce Iranian women wearing a veil. In particular, all of the Esther books feature ancient Persian women with both their head and face covered by

the veil and with very low social status. The following descriptions provide some representative examples of this. “Persian women were kept sequestered, allowed to see no males but their husbands or blood kin.”⁴⁷ The king “pulled . . . [Esther’s] veil off and the men in the tent . . . saw her face for the first time.”⁴⁸ Esther had “worn her veil in public since the age of twelve.”⁴⁹ “Persian custom did not usually provide for seats of . . . [high] status for women of any age.”⁵⁰ In addition to these descriptions, there were also repeated emphases on covering the whole face with the veil. The following examples are illustrative: Esther was looking “from behind her veil”;⁵¹ “Esther’s face flushed . . . and she was grateful for her veil”;⁵² Esther “stared over her veil. . . .”⁵³

However, as Brosius explains, “The most invaluable source for the discussion of women in the Achaemenid period are the Persepolis Fortification Tablets (PFT)” and other “archeological sources.”⁵⁴ According to archaeological records and the Persepolis Tablets, depictions of pre-Islamic women in Persia are different from what is portrayed in the books for this study. In Achaemenid times,

the representations of women show that they usually wore the pleated “court dress” and the voluminous “Ionic” chiton. . . . Occasionally . . . they wore an overgarment that, like the modern chador, covered the head and neck. . . . The face, however, was always uncovered.⁵⁵

Also, according to Price,

there are no depiction of women in Persepolis itself, however[,] there are many seals, statues and figurines that indicate there were no restrictions on the depiction of Persian women. In some of these, women are pictured fully clothed with partial veils[;] in others, they are dressed [and] even crowned but [have] no veil. The aristocratic and royal women very likely used [the] veil in public as a sign of their higher status. But veiling as an institution to subjugate, control and exclude women from public domain originated after the Islamic conquest.⁵⁶

Furthermore, according to Brosius, historical records reveal that “there are few depictions of women but they nevertheless demonstrate that women could be shown in a variety of media, and thus were an accepted subject in Achaemenid art.”⁵⁷ Brosius provides examples of this art in his entry on women in pre-Islamic Persian in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*: figure 1 presents women depicted “on a cylinder seal carved in Achaemenid court style,” and figure 2 represents “the high[-]relief figure of a high-ranking Persian woman found in Egypt . . . in a many-folded Persian dress belted in the front and wearing an elaborate necklace is wearing a turreted crown, and her bobbed hairstyle follows Achaemenid fashion.”⁵⁸ (See appendix B for figures 1 and 2.)

It is important to note that both of these archaeological sources depict Persian women with their face unveiled. Given this view, it seems that the portrayal of women’s dress code and social status in the Achaemenid period according to the archaeological evidence contradicts the sources consulted for writing the Esther books in this study. With very rare, precise facts to rely on, authors of multicultural books need to consult with more resources and be more cautious in describing their female characters.

In addition to the Esther books, this study was also concerned with the representation of Iranian women in *Remembrance of the Sun*. What may have caused contradictions between the real picture of

Iranian women before the Islamic revolution and the depicted images in this book is the fact that the practice of wearing a veil in Iran, as distinct from the Arab world, carries multiple forms and significance depending on the historical era represented. *Remembrance of the Sun* is a novel with many twists and turns, tackling serious subjects such as the Islamic revolution and love between people from different cultures. Jill is a warm, evocative, honest, and intelligent character. Her observations of Persian culture are often insightful, although not always accurate—whether about the lifestyle of people in Tehran and their political viewpoints on the revolution, or what she observes while hanging out with Shaheen in his “superlative car” and exploring “the streets, the bazaars, and the always enticing foothills.”⁵⁹ One important example of inaccuracy in the book is Jill’s descriptions of Iranian women in 1978, which most probably refer to changes in women’s appearance after the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979. The following are just some representative examples of Iranian women as described by Jill: “The sidewalks were crowded with women draped from head to foot in voluminous black chadors”; “chador-wrapped young ladies”; “there were Iranian children sledding. . . . [W]e saw two little girls in chadors . . . like a pair of crows against the snow”; “. . . can’t the little girl take off her chador even out here? . . . [S]he would probably go swimming in it.”⁶⁰ These depictions of Iranian women seem more likely to have happened in the Islamic not the Pahlavi era.

There were some Iranian women who chose to wear a chador before the revolution; some for personal and family reasons, some for their religious beliefs, and others because they highly valued a traditional lifestyle and they perceived the chador as a form of tradition opposed to modernity. However, it was with the rise of the Islamic regime that women’s dress changed dramatically throughout the whole nation. After the revolution in 1979, the Islamic republic required women to dress modestly and in particular to cover their hair as an assertion of that modesty. The significance of the chador in Iran is deeply associated with the time period represented, and it is very different from other Islamic countries; this significance is also different for urban and rural women, and it is crucial to note that the meaning and form of Islamic dress in Iran is constantly changing. So, it would not be credible to generate one general image for all women in the patriarchal societies of the Middle East. In the interests of historical accuracy, those authors of multicultural books who like to look back into the past of Iran need to exhaustively research the exact time period in which their novel is set and learn the specific details of that period. Also, it is worthwhile examining the accuracy of historical documents by checking them with various sources, such as texts, paintings, photographs, and short movies of the time period.

Although the Iranian women portrayed in these books are from different historical periods, some of them reiterated a contemporary stereotypical image of restricted and veiled women in Islamic countries. Unless those authors of multicultural books who choose to write about Iran explore and realize the differences between eras adequately, they cannot represent the culture authentically. Only those intimately familiar with the nuances of these historical periods can perceive the dimensions of the historical changes and in particular reflect the effects of these changes on women’s lives in Iran.

Arranged Marriage

The theme of arranged and forced marriages is reflected in two books of this study: *Anahita’s Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter*. Historically, there has been a long tradition of arranged and forced marriages in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, but this practice is rather outdated in contemporary Iran. In more recent years, this trend of arranged marriage is likely to still exist among the rural or urban poor in some

parts of the country but is rare in those of middle- or upper-class families.

In present-day Iran, it is very common for contemporary Iranian young men and women to consult the wisdom and experience of their parents or other older family members to select a spouse. However, the final decision on establishing a marriage bond between two families is normally not against the bride or groom's will. According to Afary, although young men and women continue to consult and negotiate with parents about prospective partners, marriage has increasingly become a prerogative of individual choice. So, a marriage in present-day Iran is most likely a negotiation and decision made by the individuals directly concerned, although parents are usually consulted. As Afary further explains, while parents still help their sons and daughters with wedding costs, young people play an active role in choosing their spouses.⁶¹

Set in Iran during the early 1900s, both *Anahita's Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter* reflect the lives of Iranian women during the Qajar period. Anahita was an Iranian nomad girl and a promised bride to an old, wealthy, and very influential man of their tribe. In spite of family disagreements, Anahita made her own plans and decided to weave a riddle into her wedding carpet and therefore to choose her future husband.

The depiction of Iranian women in *Anahita's Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter* authentically reflects the patriarchal Qajar society. Also, the portrayal of arranged and forced marriages in these two books is valid. However, among very scarce diverse books in the United States featuring non-Western countries and cultures, the theme of arranged marriage has often been portrayed. A few illustrative examples are *A Girl Named Disaster* set in Mozambique,⁶² *Homeless Bird* set in India,⁶³ and *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* set in the Cholistan desert of Pakistan.⁶⁴ So, with many other unexplored subtle cultural, social, sexual, aesthetic, and religious aspects of the non-Western world, it would be more innovative and less stereotypical to develop a keen eye for more current ideas in multicultural records about those cultures. Because of the endless possibilities of observing a culture, authors of historical fiction may want to adopt an approach to capture only those themes that have their origins in the past but are still significant today.

Zoroastrianism

Within the books for this study, there was confusion or misinformation around Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion of ancient Iran. In particular, this misperception was the case with the Esther books. All these books in one way or another situated Zoroastrians exclusively in the realm of polytheistic faith, worshipping multiple gods. The following are some representative examples. In *Esther: A Star Is Born* ancient Iranians are introduced as people worshipping "the gods of Persia."⁶⁵ They "did not know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They did not serve the Living God, who could save them from their pagan lives steeped in anger, hate, and vengeance."⁶⁶ Also, within *A Reluctant Queen: The Love Story of Esther*, people of the Zoroastrian faith worship many gods, and Ahasuerus "was a man who worshipped a strange god."⁶⁷ In *Esther the Queen: A Novel*, Esther "saw a small gold statue of Ahura-Mazda in . . . [the king's] hand. For a moment, she wished she could tell him about the true God, the one God who looked over everything and everyone."⁶⁸

The ancient religion in Iran was Zoroastrianism, which is "one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. It was founded by the Prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) in ancient Iran approximately 3500

years ago.”⁶⁹ Zoroastrians worship only one god, named Ahura Mazda, not double or multiple gods. Ahura Mazda’s name was fused “in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, and especially in those of Darius the Great, which duly celebrated him as Creator: ‘A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness.’”⁷⁰ “Zoroaster had himself proclaimed Ahura Mazda as God omnipotent, the ultimate source of evil as well as good.”⁷¹

It is imperative that authors of multicultural books consult many various and cross-referenced resources in order to represent a historically accurate faith. Nevertheless, it is inescapable that every author tends to understand ancient history of other cultures through a lens of their own culture. The challenge as well as the fascination of creating authentic books is to minimize the outsider perspective and to give the reader the insider point of view. Otherwise, the book may have vast audiences and critical acclaim, but still misrepresent and perpetuate misconceptions about the culture and therefore fail in its attempt to help the reader see the world from a different position.

Writing from the Outside Position

One widespread and long-standing concern in the field of multicultural literature is when authors attempt to write about a culture other than their own. The validity of an outsider’s perspective is not guaranteed by their birthplace, ethnicity, or even by their research of a culture. Outsiders who desire to write about a culture other than their own must deal with the dynamic nature of the researched culture. In this regard and according to the results of this study, outsiders’ attempts to portray the cultural traits or social patterns of other groups are classified into five categories:

- 1) Imagined perspective
- 2) Perspective based on the outsider’s resources
- 3) Perspective based on observation
- 4) Perspective based on socializing and consulting in the United States
- 5) Perspective based on socializing and consulting outside the United States

This discussion proceeds with explaining each of these categories in more detail. Noteworthy is how the authors of multicultural books in this study applied one or more of these approaches in their books about Iran.

Imagined perspective. The most alarming approach in creating multicultural books is to acquire an imaginary perspective of the other culture. Within this approach, authors represent some information that they only assume to be true. In the present study, these cultural assumptions ranged from slight to extensive. Some examples of minor imagined perspective are in *Remembrance of the Sun* when Jill describes the structure of Tehran. “The vast city of Tehran has no telephone book” and “Kuche Yek, Kuche Do (Little Street One, Little Street Two). Tehran was full of these, which was one reason it was just as well not to have home mail delivery.”⁷² Another example is in *A Reluctant Queen: The Love Story of Esther* when in the ancient empire, the term “apartment” is used frequently despite being not correct for the timing of the story. The more accurate residential structures in the Achaemenid era are open and closed pavilions, terraces, corridors, and chambers. Along with these assumptions about Persian culture is the use of an improper phrase in *Esther: A Star Is Born* when Esther tells Hegai, “Keep me posted.”⁷³ This terminology belongs to the present and is unlikely to have been used in that time period.

Cai argues that imaginative literature either misrepresents the reality of that culture or only reflects its stereotypical objects. He identifies the need for “a balanced view of the relationship between imagination and reality” and, referring to Sims Bishop, discusses that the “imagination-omnipotent view is abetting the publication of books that distort ethnic realities and stereotype ethnic people.”⁷⁴

Perspective based on the outsider’s resources. It is hardly possible to render another culture realistically if we only consult limited resources. In representing the history of other cultures, it is essential to review more than one point of focus. This is mainly due to the fact that there are “insider truths that counter outsider untruths and outsider truths that counter insider untruths.”⁷⁵ Many historical subjects are highly controversial, not necessarily reflecting one universally held position. Within the books for this study, the most frequent example of this approach was when the authors represented Zoroastrianism as a polytheistic religion. Also, one more important instance can be found in *Night Letter* describing “a rendering of the prophet Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac.”⁷⁶ According to the Bible, Abraham sacrificed Isaac, but, according to the Qur’an, Ishmael was the one offered to the Lord by Abraham. However, in *Night Letter*, it seems that Christianity and Islam hold the same beliefs regarding Abraham’s story.

Perspective based on observation. As discussed in the literature review, in order to demonstrate a valid portrait of different cultures, having only a general observation or understanding of that culture is inadequate. In attempting to address different facets of Persian culture in one book, some authors of multicultural books observe Iranians or non-Iranian Middle Easterners in the United States or view them in the media and assign the observed features to their historical novel, no matter what time period they are presenting. In the context of the novels for this study, the most representative instances of this approach are the images of Iranian women with the veil in all different eras ranging from the Achaemenid period to up to 1978.

Perspective based on socializing and consulting in the United States. Although none of the books in the current study seemed to have applied this approach, *Shadow Spinner* (Fletcher 1998), the sample for the pilot study, accommodated this position. In a personal email conversation with the novel’s author, Susan Fletcher explains that in writing *Shadow Spinner*, although she did not experience living in the Middle East, she did a lot of research, and two Iranian friends—Abbas Milani, the director of Persian Studies at Stanford University and Zohre Bullock—helped Fletcher tremendously. Milani and Bullock are Iranians living outside of Iran.

While the books in this category do not reflect firsthand knowledge or observation, they seem closer to the reality of Iranian life. Depending on the knowledge and insight offered by the persons or the group consulted, this approach could most possibly bring Persian authenticity into the words, thoughts, and behaviors of the characters, reflecting the traditions of the culture being depicted. In the case of *Shadow Spinner*, Milani was one of the most qualified Iranians who could have commented on a book about Persian culture. Milani’s “expertise is U.S.-Iran relations as well as Iranian cultural, political, and security issues.”⁷⁷ His vast knowledge of Iran as well as his willingness to help an American author who writes about Iran added authenticity to Fletcher’s writing.

The overview of this approach reveals the importance of a much-needed process in publishing multicultural literature. It is crucial that multicultural books are vetted before publication, being reviewed for their cultural content and also examined for their accuracy and authenticity in terms of the culture

presented. Those people who are consulted might have insider or outsider status. However, a full understanding and perception of the relevant culture is expected. A large portion of the job of vetting would involve “correction, condensation, organization, and many other modifications performed with an intention of producing a correct, consistent, accurate and complete work.”⁷⁸ As part of their specific responsibilities, these consultants are in charge of examining the cultural details. It is vital for them to support authors before and during the drafting of a multicultural manuscript. The cultural knowledge they share with authors working on a particular multicultural story raises the validity of the final book. Along with careful consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of multicultural texts and pictures, with their excellent knowledge of the depicted culture, they make certain that multicultural books are accurate, authentic, easy to follow, and also captivating for readers.

Perspective based on socializing and consulting outside the United States. This approach is most likely the best way to become fully aware of Iranian reality. In order to “understand the fine-grained meanings of behavior, feelings, and values,” the most reasonable approach for authors of multicultural books is to situate themselves in the culture’s lifestyles, so one can “decipher the unwritten grammar of conduct and the nuances of cultural idiom,”⁷⁹ thereby acquiring a more detailed sense of the researched culture’s worldview. However, a noteworthy caution is not to unify one cultural group into “cultural conglomerates”⁸⁰ of neighboring countries and cultures. As we generalize about one culture, we are likely to make inaccurate assumptions about others.

Regarding the present study, Meghan Nuttall Sayres was the only author who made huge strides in this direction and established sustained contact and correspondence with Iranians before and during the writing of her two novels: *Anahita’s Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter*. According to her blog, Sayres

has visited schools and taught creative writing workshops in schools in the U.S., Ireland, Turkey, Qatar, Iran and Uzbekistan, where she has also met with scholars, carpet weavers, dye masters and merchants to study the age-old symbolism and Sufi poetry that infuse many rugs woven throughout the Middle East.⁸¹

Through her authentic depiction of Persian culture, Sayres offers a glimpse into the vibrancy of Iranian lifestyle in the 1900s, portraying the obstacles and challenges to cultural, social, political, and personal efforts to create a democratic Iran.

Given these five categories, it appears that it is possible to acquire authentic authorship from an outsider position. Outsiders are not born or raised with a sense of belonging to cultures different from their own. On biological, ethnic, or social grounds, they do not have privileged access to insiders’ insight and knowledge. They are not engaged as members in the life of those groups. They might be sympathetic, but they lack any deep understanding of the cultural insiders’ innermost thoughts, concerns, and struggles. Depicting any culture requires knowing the inside of its people’s minds, acquiring the knowledge as well as the perspective, and also possessing the ability and skills to represent it. As demonstrated in this study, insider-outsider status is not fixed but situated within a continuum in a state of flux. Some authors of multicultural books may deem themselves as absolute outsiders, distancing themselves from non-mainstream cultures in varying degrees. Some others may position themselves on differing points of the continuum, attempting to reflect their cultural membership. To what extent they can create authentic multicultural books remains a matter of debate and is definitely different from one book to another.

Although some multicultural books authored by cultural outsiders play a major role in fostering cultural identity, it is a fact that many of them have taken an ambivalent and sometimes careless attitude toward the culture they present. Such publications may introduce a partial or incorrect picture of reality. Multicultural books can reflect a culture's deepest values, religious sentiments, struggles, and ideals. They emerge from and yet also shape a particular culture. The straightforward way to remedy the complexities of authorial intention that is external to a representative culture would be to exclude outsider authors. However, in the creation of multicultural literature, the role of both insiders and outsiders is essential, offering different perspectives, motivations, style, and treatment of other cultures. Including outsiders in the realm of multicultural books helps to create a more diverse picture. As Merton asserts, "We no longer ask whether it is the Insider or the Outsider who has monopolistic or privileged access to social truth; instead, we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking."⁸² By engaging the most comprehensive insight and interests of insiders and outsiders, multicultural books constitute the broadest stage for the manifestation of different cultures. Yet, in order to become closer to this fullest exploration and expression of people, insiders and outsiders need to collaborate continuously.

Conclusion

The small selection of young adult novels explored in this study cannot possibly communicate the wholeness of Persian culture. However, studying the authorial agency of this collection does well to highlight significant issues and values important to this cultural group. It is critical, in light of the growing diverse populations in the United States, to ensure that quality young adult novels containing authentic and accurate stories are available in libraries, classrooms, and bookstores. However, the issue of cultural authenticity is not as simple as whether the author is a cultural insider or outsider to his or her subject matter. Vital errors can occur in either case, as can authentic writing. It is my hope that by diligently pursuing an attitude of inclusion, we can enrich the lives of everyone in our community.

Appendix A:

Bibliography of the Books for This Study

No.	Title	Author	Year	Publisher	Place of Publication
1	<i>Remembrance of the Sun</i>	Kate Gilmore	2011 (orig. 1986)	iUniverse.com	Bloomington, IN
2	<i>A Reluctant Queen: The Love Story of Esther</i>	Joan Wolf	2011	Thomas Nelson	Nashville, TN
3	<i>Gun Games</i>	Faye Kellerman	2012	William Morrow	New York, NY

4	<i>Anahita's Woven Riddle</i>	Meghan Nuttall Sayres	2013 (orig. 2006)	Nortia Press	Orange County, CA
5	<i>Night Letter</i>	Meghan Nuttall Sayres	2012	Nortia Press	Orange County, CA
6	<i>Zebra Forest</i>	Adina Rishe Gewirtz	2013	Candlewick Press	Somerville, MA
7	<i>Esther the Queen: A Novel</i>	H. B. Moore	2013	Covenant Communication s	American Fork, UT
8	<i>Zillah's Gift</i>	Lois West Duffy	2009	Beaver's Pond Press	Edina, MN
9	<i>Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock</i>	Matthew Quick	2014	Little, Brown Books for Young Readers	New York, NY
10	<i>Esther: A Star Is Born</i>	Bradley Booth	2009	Pacific Press	Nampa, ID

Appendix B: Depiction of Women in Pre-Islamic Iran



Figure 1.

Woman in Achaemenid court. Adapted from M. Brosius, “Women in Pre-Islamic Persia,” 2010, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i>. Copyright 2015 by Encyclopaedia Iranica.



Figure 2.

High-ranking Persian woman. Adapted from M. Brosius, “Women in Pre-Islamic Persia,” 2010, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i>. Copyright 2015 by Encyclopaedia Iranica.

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