

Original Paper

I, Jill Alexander, American Girl Revolutionary

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Abstract

Analyzing the insider-outsider continuum in Remembrance of the Sun (1986, 2011) by Kate Gilmore, the purpose of this paper is to reveal different levels of being a female outsider protagonist moving along the insider-outsider continuum, maintaining an outsider voice, and at the same time developing an insider perspective. Remembrance of the Sun is a historical fiction authored by an outsider and set in 1978, one year before the Islamic revolution in Iran. After moving from New England to Tehran, Jill, a seventeen-year-old American girl, struggles to adjust to an unfamiliar lifestyle. However, her experience becomes a story of love and fascination when she meets Shaheen, the charismatic Iranian boy who is the first French horn player in the high school band. Frequently, Jill as an outsider to Persian culture is aligning herself with Shaheen's culture and their romance acts as a bridge, between two seemingly disparate cultures. Remembrance of the Sun reinforces that insider-outsider status is not fixed but situated within a continuum in a state of flux. The innocence of Jill and Shaheen's romance moves "Jill Alexander, American girl revolutionary" (p. 170) toward the insider position. At the end, Jill, crosses American-Iranian cultural gap with her own pace.

Keywords

Insider; outsider; multicultural young adult novel, Persian culture, cultural gap

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reveal different levels of being a female outsider protagonist moving along the insider-outsider continuum, maintaining an outsider voice, and at the same time developing an insider voice. In so doing, the paper mainly focuses on the main character's point of view and how it changes throughout the story. Regarding point of view analysis, this paper distinguishes the roles of insider and outsider, examining who views or expresses the story world, whether the story reflects insider or outsider lifestyle, and any tendency among the outsiders to become insiders or vice versa. Also, the research examines the power state of the protagonist examining its change in the story.

In the scope of the study, insiders are people of Persian descent including Iranian and outsiders are people with any ethnic background except Iranian. Persian or Iranian refers to people from Iran, all the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau or people of Persian descent. Iran, formerly known as Persia, is located in Western Asia and at the north end of the Persian Gulf. Many dialects are spoken in the country, but the official language is Persian or Farsi. Both names Iran and Persia are often used interchangeably to refer to the same country.

1.1 Cultural Accuracy and Authenticity

Debates concerning multiculturalism continue by attempting to define cultural accuracy and authenticity. Examining cultural authenticity in picture books about Asians and Asian Americans, Mo and Shen (2003) define two notions of cultural authenticity and accuracy as the portrayal of “a rich cultural resource to support us in understanding, respecting, and appreciating ourselves and others. At the same time, [these two terms] challenge us to reflect on cultural differences from the perspective of humanity” (p. 211). Central to Mo and Shen’s definition is distinguishing authenticating details from accuracy and the idea that “authenticity is not just accuracy or the avoidance of stereotyping but involves cultural values and issues/practices that are accepted as norms of the social group” (Mo & Shen, 2003, p. 200). Discussing accuracy as contrasted to authenticity, Mo and Shen believe “accuracy basically focuses on cultural facts instead of values” (p. 200). Elaborating further, they explain authentic literature needs to represent the values that the majority of members from that culture do or do not believe. Their definition of authenticity is tied directly to the view that there is a difference in what the authors and illustrators represent accurately and how they represent it authentically.

In discussing cultural authenticity, Cai (2002) maintains the idea that while accuracy generates information, authentic representation generates empowerment, which is the ultimate purpose of multicultural literature. Sims Bishop (1994) emphasizes multicultural children’s literature should enhance a positive sense about other cultures and toward cultural differences. Sims Bishop’s definition has been criticized by scholars for the lack of emphasis on the complexities of real life; that is, the positive representation does not go beyond the simplistic multiculturalism. Clarifying Sims Bishop’s viewpoint, Cai (2002) explains that the notion of positive is not the same as positive presentation in a book or creating positive stereotypes of that culture. “It is a violation of the principle of realism if we insist on presenting only positive images and experiences of being a person of color or living in a multicultural society” (Cai, 2002, p. 89). Authentic literature does not represent necessarily the richness of a culture. Instead, to present an authentic work, it is important to portray the real essence of a cultural group including its values as well as its conflicts. With these definitions of accuracy and authenticity in mind, the discussion advances by identifying instances of insider and outsider perspectives in *Remembrance of the Sun*.

2. Method

Qualitative content analysis methodology was employed to explore relationship(s) among textual data,

culture, and power structure. The qualitative content analysis focused on a comparison of categorical units designed for this research to produce descriptions and patterns reflecting how the Persian world is represented through narrative elements. To complete the qualitative analysis, the researcher examined to what extent, one or more of these cultural codes were used by narrative elements. The coding frame for this content analysis consisted of four common narrative elements including: character and characterization, plot, point of view, and setting, as major categories (see Tables 1 to 4). Regarding character and characterization, the study examined the way Persian and non-Persian protagonists were described, including their actions, traits, discourse, state, feelings, and thoughts. In order to reveal the storyline of the book, this research identified what major events happened, in what setting, and what characters were present. Furthermore, in order to best reveal the point of view of the characters in *Remembrance of the Sun*, this research related point of view analysis to the roles of insiders and outsiders. In the scope of this paper, insiders were people of Persian descent including Iranian Americans and outsiders, in contrast, were people with any ethnic background except Iranian. Regarding setting analysis, the researcher examined two elements of timing and place. The following section explains the significance and the relevance of *Remembrance of the Sun's* character and characterization, plot, point of view, and setting to Persian culture in the context of the present study.

3. Discussion and Results

Jill Alexander was a seventeen-year-old American “blond” (p. 117) girl from “New England” (p. 234). She had “long tan legs” (p. 24) and often smoked a “cigarette” (p. 106). Jill was “the daughter of a much traveled consultant” (p. 4) and “an oil engineer” (p. 3). At Tehran Community school she “was given the unenviable part of fourth horn” (p. 5) player where she met Shaheen. Shaheen was an Iranian young man who “played first French horn” (p. 4). With his “dark eyes under straight, thick brows” (p. 5), and his father as “the carpet king of the Tehran bazaar” (p. 27) he was a real “catch” (p. 38). Jill was very passionate about the classical music of Iran. Once she mentioned that with “its rhythms in my blood” (p. 71) “the music [could] carry me back through centuries of solitude and desire” (p. 70).

Within this book, the plot mainly progressed with human characters including Jill Alexander, the protagonist, and Shaheen Rohani, the second major character. Jill was an American girl while Shaheen was Iranian. Both Jill’s and Shaheen’s families played minor parts in progressing the plot. Insider versus outsider position within the context of this book involved two different forms: 1) Jill, the Alexander family, and their Americans friends’ point of view on Iran and Persian culture, and 2) Shaheen, the Rohani family, and their Iranian friends’ point of view on Iran. Jill was a first-person narrator and narrated the events through her perspective and also through Shaheen’s point of view. The dialogues among Jill, Shaheen, and to the lesser extent the members of the families and friends expressed a combination of insider and outsider perspectives throughout the book.

Remembrance of the Sun sets in 1978, one year before the Islamic revolution in Iran. Although there were several references to major cities in Iran such as “Abadan” (p. 96), “Qom” (p. 123), “Isfahan” (p.

66), and “Tabriz” (p. 146), all the events happened in the capital with total 44 references to Tehran. There were also many accurate references to street names, sightseeing, and common places in Tehran like “Tajrish bazaar” (p. 15), “Mount Damavand” (p. 30), “Darrakeh” (p. 41), “Pahlavi” (p. 79), “Vanak circle” (p. 51), and “Sa’atabad” (p. 118). Throughout the story there were 61 references to the bazaar and very few references to non-common Iranian public places such as “nightclub” (p. 84), “bar” (p. 81), and “liquor store” (p. 61). In addition to these locations, there were several references to non-Iranian places such as “Boston Symphony Orchestra” (p. 121), “London and Munich and New York” (p. 132), and “Mexico” (p. 245).

Remembrance of the Sun demonstrated a sense of belonging of an outsider who adopted Persian culture. In this book, the outsider was from a non-Iranian culture by birth but experienced owning Persian culture because of falling in love with someone from that culture. When Jill’s father is appointed as a consulting oil engineer in Naft Melli, the Alexander family move from New England to Tehran to start living in a foreign country. For Jill, the real challenges are adjusting to their new lifestyle in an unfamiliar setting and learning the Persian language and culture. Her life is complicated when Shaheen appears as the first French horn player in the high school band. Jill’s experience in Iran is about to become a story of love, wonder, and fascination. Shaheen is handsome, charismatic, insightful, bold, and from a very wealthy family. However, with his radical political viewpoints he never hesitates to join the violent demonstrations against the Shah of Iran. The innocence of Jill and Shaheen’s romance is a sharp contrast to the harsh and tense political situation in Iran before the Islamic revolution. At the end, just before the fall of the Shah, the Alexander family must leave Iran and inevitably Jill and Shaheen’s love story fades in the chaotic circumstances of the revolution.

Positioning themselves as outsiders, the Alexander family and their American friends capture the Persian culture largely through their attempt to learn the lifestyle of a new community in which they started living. They prove their perspective as insiders mainly in two different circumstances including: 1) Jill’s fascination with Persian poetry, storytelling, and music. She finds Persian music as the language of her soul and the residence of her spirituality. 2) The symbolism used in this novel represents and suggests ideas, events, and actions related to the dynamics of Persian culture.

In a broader sense and not limited to these two cultural representations, the close content analysis of the book demonstrates characters’ practices or actions in Persian culture both authentically and in-authentically. Among many authentic and accurate ideas presented in this story are the description of the city of Tehran, the streets, the language, and people’s everyday lifestyle. One authentic instance is when Jill describes Jube, very narrow water streams that are very common in the streets of Tehran. “Jube ... was always full of sparkling fresh water. These irrigation ditches were everywhere in Tehran. They ran on either side of nearly every street, bringing the abundant water of the mountains to all parts of the city” (p. 13). Also, in conversing with Shaheen, Jill learns many details about Persian carpets and Iranians’ lifestyle such as “Even poor people usually have a few [carpets]. Carpets are our savings bank and stock market combined. They’re an investment” (p. 28). Other valid examples include but are not

limited to these following excerpts. “Everyone in Tehran climbs” (p. 31), since Tehran is all surrounded by mountains. “Moharram is the terrible month of mourning for Hossein, murdered by the caliph’s soldiers at Kerbala in the seventh century” (p. 77), and “Iranians like to have a good time as much as anyone else, and they aren’t severe like the Arabs” (p. 84).

One important example of inaccuracy is the description of Iranian women in 1978, just before the Islamic revolution. The portrayal of women most likely refers to the period after the overthrow of the Pahlavi Dynasty when Islamic dressing was imposed on women and not before that historical period. Some examples of this inaccurate representation are: “The sidewalks were crowded with women draped from head to foot in voluminous black chadors” (p. 2), “... black-robed women” (p. 2), “... chador-wrapped young ladies” (p. 61), “there were Iranian children sledding ... we saw two little girls in chadors...like a pair of crows against the snow” (pp. 81-82), “... can’t the little girl take off her chador even out here? ... she would probably go swimming in it” (p. 195). What may have caused contradiction 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. The incorrect depictions of Iranian women in the book seem more likely to have happened in the Islamic not the Pahlavi era.

One other inaccurate representation of Persian culture is referring to Iran as a desert. For example, “a hot loaf of barbari clutched to the chest is a lovely thing in the desert night” (p. 36) or in another scene when Jill tells Shaheen, “you might be out in the desert” (p. 149). Iran's geographical location is in West Asia, bordering the Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Gulf of Oman and its geography is significantly different from the neighboring countries. In fact, only about 20% of the country is considered desert and the rest presents highly diverse landscapes, forests, glaciers, and mountainous rangelands. Another invalid portrayal of life in Iran is when Jill describes Tehran’s summer weather as roasting without a swimming pool. There are many indoor and outdoor private and public swimming pools with or without diving boards in Iran. Most of hotels and resorts offer swimming pools to their guests. Home pools are also very desirable and popular. In particular, Alexander’s family lived in an upscale region in Tehran that most likely has had a swimming pool.

Another major inaccuracy in the book is when Jill refers to the Persian alphabet as Arabic. For instance, she says, “I slashed Shaheen’s banal message in bold Arabic characters” (p. 229). Persian alphabet and Arabic are significantly different with completely different phonologies and grammar. Persian alphabet has four extra letters and the concept of verbs, gender, sentence structure, and plurals between these two languages are significantly different.

Among other inaccuracies in this book are the incorrect names of people and places. For example, Jill talks to her American friend about an Iranian young man called Hassan Marubian. Jill tells her friend, “your pal Marubian is almost certainly a Christian” (p. 84); however, Hassan is a Shia Moslem name and could not belong to a Christian. In addition, the fire jumping festival of Chahar Shanbe Souri is

introduced as “Chahar Shambe, which is the fourth day of No Ruz” (p. 173). The correct pronunciation is Chahar Shanbe with the letter ‘n’ rather than ‘m’ and the true timing of this festival is the last Tuesday night of the Iranian year not the fourth day of No Ruz. No Ruz also known as Nowruz is Persian new year, beginning on the spring equinox.

The process of data collection for this book also reveals different levels of being outsider becoming insider or vice versa. The following excerpts reinforces Jill’s tendency and at the same time her struggle to move along the insider-outsider continuum. Once she tells Shaheen, “you can’t expect the blood of martyrs to run in my veins ... but I want you to win, and I will do anything to help you” (p. 192). In another scene Jill mentions, “I’ve been out in the streets with Shaheen when it was all happening, and I’ve met some of his friends. They’re not playing cops and robbers” (p. 212). Also, reflecting on her mixed emotions about Iran, Jill says, “underlying my easy, joyous acceptance of Iran was a deep sense of its strangeness, its harsh contrast, its secret ways. I was an outsider, intensely involved but excluded, even, I thought, scorned” (p. 114). Along with all those feelings, she confesses to Shaheen, “I’ll even put on the disgusting chador if I have to, with a big safety pin under my chin” (p. 170), and “I am going to stay with you—I, Jill Alexander, American girl revolutionary ...” (p. 170).

In order to examine the power state of Jill as the major character, the study applies the power continuum suggested by Botelho and Rudman (2009) including four conditions of “domination, collusion, resistance, and agency” (p. 118) and examines the protagonists’ state of power-change from being under domination to having agency in each book. Furthermore, on Botelho and Rudman’s continuum of domination through agency, the study adopts power descriptors suggested by Kelley (2008). In her study, Kelley maintains the idea that characters can be advantaged or disadvantaged “emotionally, physically, economically, socially, and politically” (p. 34). Applying Botelho and Rudman’s measurement and also Kelley’s benefit-indicators to the power spectrum of domination through agency, this study examines Jill’s state of advantage or disadvantage including emotional, physical, economic, social, or political.

Tracking Jill Alexander’s state of power-change shows her position shifting several times from being under domination to collusion, from being under domination to having agency, and from having agency to being under domination. For example, toward the end of the novel Jill is able to influence and control the behavior of the Iranian police officer through inventing a fake story about the protest against Shah. As she explains, “the only way I was going to do that was to tell this highly intelligent police officer a story that was plausible enough to be believed” (p. 227) because she is there “to save Shaheen” (p. 227). Meanwhile, at the very same time her family’s financial status is very tense, dominated by the social and political forces. As an instance, she expresses that “My mother and I were the first members of the family to learn that my father had lost his job at the oil company” (p. 199) and “my parents who were, through no fault of their own, nearly penniless in a foreign land” (p. 204). Another significant power change in Jill’s life in Iran is her acquaintance with Shaheen’s relatives. As demonstrated in the following excerpt, the various kinds of unwilling behavior by Shaheen’s family

changed Jill's power status from having agency to being under domination.

A mixture of fear and fascination ... Shaheen's home—the place where he went away from me and became an Iranian. And underlying my easy, joyous acceptance of Iran was a deep sense of its strangeness, its harsh contrast, its secret ways. I was an outsider; intensely involved but excluded, even, I thought, scorned. (p. 114)

It is worthy to note that in *Remembrance of the Sun*, American and Iranian characters are equally important; Jill, American, and Shaheen, Iranian, are portrayed with different layers of complexity and agency. Frequently, Jill is aligning 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.

Remembrance of the Sun is a novel with many twists and turns, tackling serious subjects such as the Islamic revolution and love between different cultures. Jill is a warm, evocative, honest, and intelligent character. Her observations of Persian culture, whether about their lifestyle in Tehran, the political viewpoints on the revolution, and her company with Shaheen are often insightful, although not always accurate. 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 is true. In the present paper, these cultural assumptions range from slight to extensive forms. Cai (2002) 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” (p. 175) 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” (Cai, 2002, p. 169).

Depicting any culture requires knowing the inside of its people's minds, acquiring the knowledge as well as the perspective, and also 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 from non-mainstream cultures in varying degrees. Some others may position themselves at 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.

Remembrance of the Sun, demonstrates a sense of belonging of an outsider who adopts Persian culture. The outsider is from a non-Iranian culture by birth but experiences owning Persian culture because of falling in love with someone from that culture. In the beginning, she is not willing to alter her American norms to incorporate the norms of Iran. However, after falling in love with Shaheen, she assures Shaheen, “I'll even put on the disgusting chador if I have to, with a big safety pin under my chin,” (p. 170). “Jill Alexander, American girl revolutionary ...” (p. 170) has taken initial steps to share stories. She may make mistakes and gets lost. Yet, walking with her own pace, she is finding a way in the labyrinth of multicultural worlds.

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Table 1. Character and Characterization Category

Character	Animal	Human	Thing	Fictional creature	Magical	Not specified				
Language(s) character speaks or knows	Persian	Arabic	English	French	Others					
Chronological age of character										
Physical description										
Name of character	Persian Name	Arabic Name	Not Persian	Not Arabic	Not specified					
Belief system of character	Atheist	Muslim	Christian	Zoroaster	Buddhist	Jewish	Converted	Religion	Fictional	Not specified
Disability										
Gender of character	Male		Female	LGBTQ	Not specified					

Ethnicity of Character	Iranian	Iranian American	Iranian European	Not Iranian	Eastern	Middle	Not specified	Fictional
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Table 2. Plot Category

What Event Happens	In What Setting	With Who Is Present
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Table 3. Point of View Category

Insider	Outsider
Point of View	

Table 4. Setting Category

Geographical location	Iran	Refers to common places in Iran (like Mosque, bazaar, teahouse)	Refers to not common places in Iran (like bar, church, night club)	Refers to places not located in Iran	Fictional place
Timing	About one generation ago	Contemporary	Future	Past history	Not mentioned
Culture	Explicit reference to Iran	Implicit reference to Iran	Other culture(s)	Not clear	Fictional culture