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A Relational Bildungsroman: A Refugee Girl's Narrative of Subject Development in *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*

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ABSTRACT: Dina Nayeri, a well-recognized author and lecturer of literature who escaped Iran when she was 10 years old, experiments with a unique form of storytelling in her first novel, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*. This paper examines the peculiarities of Nayeri's narrative and its implications for the tradition of Bildungsroman as the novel exemplifies important emerging changes in literary representation of refugees. The conventional Bildungsroman played an important role in the development of the modern concepts of the individual and the nation state. In other words, the Bildungsroman, as a popular cultural product of the 19th century, promoted and consolidated the idea of human subject as a citizen of a modern nation state. Refugees, stranded outside national borders and deprived of citizenship, thus pose a particularly difficult representational problem. Disrupting the ideological function of the genre of Bildungsroman, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* constructs a relational subject with multi-directional agency that retains a potential to give voice to the otherwise obscure figure of refugees. In other words, utilizing and creatively mixing American and Iranian narrative forms and weaving multiple storytellers' voices together, the novel constructs an agency that is developed and expressed through diverse connections between people in and across generations, cultures, and national borders. As a result, a consistent, though multi-layered and shifting, sense of self emerges, redefining the genre and challenging the way the world and people are imagined today.

Key Words: Refugee, Bildungsroman, Storytelling, Dina Nayeri, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*

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In 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) made an urgent announcement: "We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 65.3 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 21.3 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18." (https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/figures-at-a-glance-2/Budnu 68). This dramatic increase in the number of displaced people raises serious literary as well as political issues of representation. According to Joseph Slaughter, novels, as a "predominant formal literary technology" of the 19th century, elucidated that to be a human meant being a citizen of a nation state (22). As a result, as Alexandra Budny puts it, one who "exceeds or belies the traditional nation-state citizen/home-belonging model" becomes illegible, as "the dominant narrative deliberately" excludes them, "making in effect their experiences and their identity illegitimate" (251). Refugees, stranded outside national borders and deprived of citizenship, thus pose a particularly difficult representational problem, because as Giorgio Agamben argues, "the condition of counrtyless refugee" breaks "the identity between the human and the citizen (93)." Not surprisingly, refugees are featured merely as abject victims or passive targets of the western rescue mission in most western media.

At the same time, however, it is through narratives that a refugee can make his/her voice heard. Applying Paul Ricoeur's concept of "redescription," Meg Jensen argues that narratives that are based on the refugee author's experience have the potential "to enable the voiceless to be heard and the faceless made visible via a recognizable (though virtual) form, which in turn supplies that incorporated fictive figure with both legibility and agency" (188). Just as novels have contributed to the construction of the modern concept of human subject as a citizen, recent works about and by refugees address this issue, challenging and transforming what it means to be human today.

Dina Nayeri, a well-recognized author and lecturer of literature who escaped Iran when she was 10 years old, is one of those authors who actively

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explore the problems that refugees present and face[1]. In her first novel, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* (2013), Nayeri experiments with a unique form of storytelling that would enable a refugee woman's perspective to be heard. Against prevalent western discourses concerning brown girls, refugee girls in the novel develop agency within and through the narratives they create. That is, as the novel weaves multiple storytellers' voices together, it constructs an agency that is developed and expressed through diverse connections between people in and across generations, cultures, and national borders; and as a result, a consistent, though multi-layered and shifting, sense of self emerges that enables one to create meaning in the otherwise chaotic and traumatic world. This paper examines the peculiarities of Nayeri's narrative and its implications for the tradition of Bildungsroman; although it has not yet gained much critical attention, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* (hereafter *A Teaspoon*) exemplifies important emerging changes in the literary representation of refugees. Utilizing and creatively mixing American and Iranian narrative forms, women storytellers of the novel bring about a relational subject with multi-directional agency that retains a potential to give voice to the otherwise obscure figure of refugees, redefining the genre and challenging the way the world and people are imagined today.

I. Unraveling the Notion of Nation States

Considering the daunting number of young refugees under 18, as well as the genre's socio-historical function, it is significant that many of the recent works by refugee writers can be roughly categorized as narratives of development—to use a more traditional term, the *Bildungsroman*. As many

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[1] Other notable refugee writers include Viet Thanh Nguyen. For more on Nguyen's treatment of refugees, see Hyosun Lee, "Rewriting the Vietnam War: A Refugee's Confession in *The Sympathizer*.'

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critics have pointed out, the conventional Bildungsroman played an important role in the development of the modern concepts of the individual conjoined with that of the nation state. Franco Moretti (2000), for instance, argues that the Bildungsroman is deemed "an essential, pivotal point of our history" because it has succeeded in representing the modern individual as a convinced citizen who "perceives the social norms as one's own" (15). In other words, the Bildungsroman, as a popular cultural product of the 19th century, promoted and consolidated the idea of human subject as a citizen of a modern nation state. As Lisa Lowe points out, the narrative device of the Bildungsroman has also widely served as a means of narrating the incorporation of Asian immigrants into the US, as "the genre's movement from the uncertainty of youth to the power of maturity is often used to buttress Western ideas of progress" (103).

At the same time, however, precisely because of this ideological function, the Bildungsroman has been an appealing genre for social outsiders. For instance, critics of modernist and Ethnic American Bildungsromane such as Jed Esty and Patricia Chu have noted how subsequent generations of writers have appropriated and transformed the genre to challenge the very process and requirements of becoming an approved member of a modern nation. Read in this way, the later Bildungsroman becomes a field of contestation where the normative ideological force and diverse challenges to it compete and intersect. The recent trajectory of the genre, as porous as its definition and boundary have been, thus reflects the contradictions of and resistance to the discourses that constitute modern personhood.

A Teaspoon belongs to this latter category of disruptive Bildungsroman. Even as its main plot consists of a girl's project of forming a sense of an independent self, the novel challenges the modern notion of self that is inextricably tied to modern nation states and their world order. Her story of growth reveals the extent to which the notion of modern statehood is changing, its boundaries becoming obscure and expansive even as governments are fighting to keep them tight and secure.

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The novel is set in post-revolution Iran—that is, after the Iranian government closed its doors to Western influences; yet the novel highlights the fact that the country remains part of the late capitalist global world order. At the beginning of the novel, Saba, the 11-year-old protagonist, has lost her twin sister, Mahtab, and her mother, Bahareh, and believes that they have left for America, leaving her and her father behind in Iran. Saba's memories at the airport where she thinks she saw them leave are confused and fragmented, and the readers have to wait until Saba grows up and is ready to leave Iran to find out what really happened. Shortly after coming back from the airport, Saba begins to tell the story of Mahtab's life in America, modeling them after some American sitcoms whose videotapes she secretly acquires from the black market. Voicing her need and longing for her mother and sister through her stories, Saba learns to draw a cognitive map onto her chaotic world by juxtaposing different lives in different places.

As the readers would learn toward the end of the novel, Mahtab had drowned in the Caspian Sea before the trip to the airport, and Saba's mother had been arrested by the Pasdars, the dreaded Iranian moral police, at the airport. Having been the more dependent of the twins, Saba suffers from survivor guilt and is unable to remember Mahtab's death. The novel also makes it clear how Islamic revolution of 1979 had damaged Saba's mother, a college-educated, high-spirited urban Christian woman. Khanom Basir, a traditional local storyteller and one of the three surrogate mothers to Saba after her mother's disappearance, criticizes Bahareh for instilling ambitions of self-fulfillment and admiration for western culture in her daughters. Taught by such a mother to regard herself as "a lucky girl who reads English" (8), Saba finds it difficult to find her place in Cheshmeh, "a peaceful rice-farming village" (6), where her father's childhood friends shield him from the new Islamic regime (16). Saba feels that she will "always be the outsider" (31), and her feeling of alienation is imaginatively and critically mirrored in her description of Mahtab's experience in America.

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Significantly, Saba is an avid consumer of American products from cosmetics to television programs and contemporary novels, which significantly affect the very structure of her stories. In *Transnational America*, Inderpal Grewal claims that the discourse of American dream is not limited to the American borders, because the late twentieth century's networks of knowledge and communication produced information about America that circulates across cultures and national borders (5). According to Grewal, conjunction of consumer cultures and democratic rights cultures contributed to the transnational production of "Americanness," "so that becoming American did not always or necessarily connote full participation or belonging to a nation-state" (8). Saba, who, thanks to her father's wealth, can buy American videotapes, magazines and novels, is part of this network of consumer culture that acts to "produce provisional national subjects out of immigrants and refugees" (8). Hence, she is an active participant in the complex creation and proliferation of what Grewal calls "[i]maginaries of America."

In this way, the identity Saba creates for herself is always tied to the way America is imagined inside and outside American borders as well as the complicated histories of American involvement in Iranian history. The new religious regime of Iran seeks a total erasure of women's presence in all public spaces. Longing after a mother who prepared her for a life in America, yet living in a society where girls are heavily monitored by state authorities and hidden behind the walls and under the veils, Saba's feeling of alienation is imaginatively and critically mirrored in her description of Mahtab's experience in America. For instance, in Part I "Unseen Strand," it is important for Saba to emphasize how Mahtab, now supposedly facing "a better life" in America, is identical to herself (18). She imagines her mother saying to Mahtab: "all of life is written in the blood … and you and Saba have the same blood. It doesn't matter where you live. This is true" (41). In other words, although she is left in a rather isolated Iranian village, Saba sees herself growing up as a refugee in America; this imaginary displacement

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introduces complications into the identity she constructs for herself. Saba projects her own emotional needs onto Mahtab's American story, imagining that Mahtab would find ways to deal with the same needs as her own. Being positioned outside America, yet consuming and being shaped by the idea of America, Saba's act of storytelling highlights the extent of the global networks of national and cultural borders, disrupting the conventional format of discourses about self-formation within a nation state.

However, Saba's stories of America are not simply expressions of longing and glorification of the country. In her stories of Mahtab, Saba explicitly refuses to conform to the stereotypes of Asian women in American culture. Quoting typical American assimilation stories and juxtaposing them with her own life in a vastly different, albeit connected, society, Saba imagines herself differently from the way one society dictates it to be. For instance, when Saba imagines Mahtab meeting her white boyfriend's mother, she models the story after *Joy Luck Club* (179). Reading *Joy Luck Club* as a quintessential Asian American woman's Bildungsroman, Patricia Chu identifies the central project of the novel as establishing "the newcomers not only as less alien but as quintessential American subject (141)." Just as Rose in *Joy Luck Club*, Mahtab in Saba's imagination shows that she does not need the sanction of a white mother to be acknowledged as an American. Mahtab exhibits her control over the boyfriend in front of his mother, and when she leaves him, proves to herself as well as to others that she needs no one else's approval to be a confident American. However, whereas Amy Tan "bases her understanding of female agency on her experiences as a middle-class American in a post-feminist era without being fully aware of how privileged this position is," thus displaying the lack of "historical self-consciousness about the enabling conditions for female self-assertion in America" (150), the very fact that it is Saba in Iran who tells the story highlights the relative privilege of Mahtab's position in America. By juxtaposing Mahtab's story to her own, and representing them as drastically different from, though intrinsically connected

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to her own life, Saba's stories demonstrate the under-privileged positions that is disregarded in the original American novel. That is, it makes it clear that America as a globally circulating idea is structurally dependent on the inferior status of other parts of the world.

II. Narrating a Relational Self into Being

Instead of citizenship, what affects the way a girl sees herself in *A Teaspoon* are the stories she chooses to interweave and transform. At first, narrating the stories of her other self gives voice to Saba's own difficulties and inconsistencies, helping her to find ways to overcome them. For instance, when it is discovered that her childhood friend Reza kissed her out of adolescent curiosity, Saba has no other option but to agree to marry the man recommended by her father. Struggling to find a way to retain at least a minimal control over her life, she imagines that Mahtab would leave her white American boyfriend: "She has the ultimate power to reject, to refuse forgiveness, She has abilities that – as I sat and listened to a suitor for my own hand—would have given a fortune to possess (188)." Telling this story of Mahtab, Saba resolves to utilize her father's social status to make a contract with her first husband, a much older and ailing man, so that after the husband's death, she would be left with his fortune, which would secure her financial freedom and respectful social status. In this way, she imagines that she would be "a little more like the sister conquering the world so many scoops of a teaspoon away" (163). After the death of this husband who abuses and injures her, Saba believes that she wants to have babies and settle down in Cheshmeh country life with her childhood friend Reza. It is the stories of Mahtab that helps her realize that what she really wants is physical and mental independence—the stories are the medium through which she tests and recognizes her own desires and fears.

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By imagining that Mahtab does not want babies and refuses her in-laws' wishes for grandchildren, Saba not only fulfills her secret wish in the story, but also mock-experiences the other way of life that she thinks she is abandoning. She admires Mahtab for lying to achieve what she wants, as lying gives her an opportunity to shape her own situation: "Mahtab doesn't need a child, or anyone at all. That is her greatest strength…What power she has! That is the thing about Mahtab. She chooses all that happens to her. She doesn't want babies and so she doesn't have them, and in doing so she gives me such hope (405-08)." Ultimately, Saba learns that she cannot have babies, and telling Mahtab's story helps her realize that it is not incapability but a possibility that empowers her to leave the course of the life that is expected of her. After all, power of lying is akin to the power to fabricate stories.

In this way, Saba's stories create an intricate connection between the two disparate world of America and Iran, in a way that reflects, but also disrupts the dynamics of the real international politics. Instead of one-way generosity, experience and struggle in one place condition and affect the struggle in the other place and vice versa. Mahtab's experience is not superior to Saba's; rather, it is a reflection of, and response to, similar experiences, serving as a motivation for Saba to take initiative in developing political, moral, and rhetorical autonomy. Situated in the larger intersection of cultures and nations, the linkage that Saba's stories weave out serves as an important means to produce and perform knowledge about herself and the world.

Indeed, storytelling is not a solitary act; by definition, it posits a connection between the teller and the listener. Following the tradition of Iranian storytelling, Saba's stories are always told to and for someone in her community. The very act of interacting with her listeners helps her imagine her place in the complex web of interpersonal connections, as well as intercultural ones. When Saba first invents the story of Mahtab, it bewilders her father. Saba's father, who is also traumatized by loss of his daughter and the subsequent disappearance of his wife, is soothed by Saba's story of seeing

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Mahtab and her mother boarding an airplane at the airport. Later Saba learns that it was her stories that her father also depended on, evincing the immediate power and function of the stories Saba invents about her lost twin. In other words, the stories are not only Saba's, but also her family and community's means to survive and cope with traumatic loss and changes in life. The act of telling Mahtab's stories to sympathetic listeners who understand that the stories are her way of coping with life also offers Saba a critical distance from which to regard her own experience. The three women who take care of her teach her to regard her stories in a different way than a simple pastime or an immature girl's vain wish-fulfillment, encouraging her to develop the stories further at critical moments of her life and thus helping her to survive. Saba not only gains control over her own life by telling Mahtab's stories, but the very control comes from her positioning herself within a larger web of people that the act of telling stories creates.

Saba first learns the art of storytelling from Khanom Basir, a traditional Iranian storyteller. Proud of her skills, Khanom Basir dexterously adjusts her stories in response to and in communion with her listeners, always commanding their attention. According to her, the knack for storytelling is the best talent that can ultimately influence the way reality is perceived: "I too gave a gift—the best one, a power over words, over legends, truth and lies (67)." She recognizes the same gift in Saba: "She's a natural storyteller. She learned that from me—how to weave a tale or a good lie, how to choose which parts to tell and which parts to leave out (14)." Though conventional in her beliefs, Khanom Basir displays insight into human hearts and transforms her listeners' understanding of reality, helping them cope with difficult times. The readers of *A Teaspoon* also hear Khanom Basir's voice directly as she narrates her stories in separate yet responding sections that alternate with the chapters of Saba. Saba's two other surrogate mothers also occasionally tell their version of the stories. The older women's stories, however, not only complete the main storyline but have themes and rhythms of their own,

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displaying the power of traditional storytelling. Modeling the way different stories connect, intersect, and expand, their stories play an important role in providing multiple dimensions to Saba's story.

However, Khanom Basir's stories mostly follow the strict conventional rules that ultimately maintain the boundaries between reality and fiction. She sticks to the regional format of traditional storytelling, which demands the teller to clarify the veracity of each story at its conclusion: "at the end of the very tale, the storyteller is required to do the truth-and lies poem, the one that rhymes with 'yogurt' and 'yogurt soda' (mast and doogh) with truth and lies (raast and doroogh)" (47-48). If the storyteller ends the poem with *mast*, the listener knows that the story is true, and with *doogh*, then fictional. Khanom Basir accuses Saba of breaking this rule intentionally, as the girl ends her Mahtab episodes with *mast* instead of *doogh*. Proclaiming that her stories of Mahtab in America are true, Saba obscures the distinction between the imagined reality of the west and the truth of the Iranian present, which makes it possible for the implications of the stories resonate further than the people immediately involved. In addition, as it makes it impossible for Saba's listeners to decide on the authenticity of the stories, what matters more is the implications of the stories and their effect on the participants rather than immediate objective truthfulness, which, in turn, opens up new planes on which to consider the ways in which those stories relate to reality.

III. Lionesses

Saba extends this capacity of storytelling further by imagining Mahtab report the stories of an actual events that Saba herself witnesses. Ponneh, Saba's childhood best friend, joins a secret women's political group and playfully flirts with another girl. When that other girl is accused of lesbianism and sentenced to death, Saba and Ponneh risk their lives to document the

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public execution. Afterward, Saba imagines that Mahtab secures a job in the NY times by writing an article that reports the incident. In turn, when Saba is about to leave Iran for America, she tells Ponneh to send the video tape to her. In the epilogue of the novel, after having graduated from an American college with a degree in journalism, Saba, now a journalist, travels to New York to cover 9/11. When she "returns to California, her camera filled with photos and her notebook with stories," she receives a call from Dr. Zohreh, the leader of Ponneh's group, as she "has slowly acquiesced to Dr. Zohreh's requests to help her secret group (463)."

As many critics have warily noted, the figure of helpless brown girl in urgent need of rescue was widely circulated after 9/11. One of the more famous instances is Laura Bush's November 17, 2001, radio address, which focused on the distress of Afghanistan women under a terrorist regime. In an analysis of the rescue discourse employed in the speech, Leigh Gilmore (680) argues that the figure of veiled girl is utilized to justify the subsequent US military invasions of the Islamic countries, and thus echoes Gayatri Spivak's famous phrase that defined British Imperialism as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (120). Ozlem Sensoy and Elizabeth Marshall also note that "books written by or about the plight of Muslim women and girls in South-East Asia and the Middle East have appeared in increasing numbers in the West since September 11, 2001" (295). They argue that the proliferation of these stories contributes to the recent hypervisibility of girls in popular media, as they seek to empower the first world girls at the expense of their "Third World" counterparts (296). In other words, neoliberal developmental discourse calls out to white girls to "save" brown girls in the global South, which ultimately renders brown girls illegible subjects unable to fend for themselves. As a consequence, "[s]tripped of local context and redolent of colonial representation, these girls never grow up or out of crisis, never achieve different positions in relation to crisis, never reflect shifting temporalities as they and circumstances change (684)."

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In drastic contrast, Iranian girls and women in *A Teaspoon* actively search for ways to protest the gendered oppression they suffer. Dr. Zorheh, Saba's mother's friend, organizes and supports a secret group called "Sheerzan (Lionesses)" that resists state-sponsored violence against women. The Sheerzans use their available international connections as political leverage in challenging the state authority at home. Also, rather than waiting to be rescued or calling out for help, Saba's surrogate mothers attack the Pasdar who beats Ponneh for wearing high-hilled shoes, and use the authority the society allows them for their age to protect Ponneh from further harassment. Ponneh, apolitical until she is persecuted for her exceptional beauty, joins Sheerzan out of curiosity, but eventually develops an independent political consciousness. The story of Ponneh, as well as other women whose voices are heard in the novel, disrupts the widespread post-9/11 discourse that cast Muslim girls as undifferentiated victims of male oppression. Even as the novel stages various instances in which women, especially unmarried young girls, are denied social rights, it also shows that the women themselves find ways to fight back and take control. Instead of seeing themselves as mere victims passively waiting for help, the women in the novel assume political agency by forming an extended form of political community. The image of helpless brown girls, so prevalent in the western media, is thus refuted and reconceived as politically active subjects who find creative means to fight for themselves and tell their own stories. In addition, by refusing to obscure the economic, political, legal, and cultural differences that mark Saba and her friend's experiences, the novel offers rhetorical strategies that are effective in challenging such uniform figurations of "brown girls."

As Gilmore and Marshall point out, "a globally circulating discourse of girlhood" that revolves around the figure of the imperiled, helpless colored girl "has become the focus of human rights campaigns, corporate philanthropy, and service learning projects based in the United States" (667). However, if a refugee girl, instead of being isolated from any context, is able to maintain

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and draw strength from her original culture while forming new connections in the new place where she is transplanted, then being a refugee is not simply losing one's humanhood that is often defined as having citizenship; rather, it points to an emerging polivocal, multi-faceted subject that is active in the intersections of people, cultures, and nations. Mahtab and Saba successfully adjust to American life and become professional journalists without severing their ties to Iran; that is, even as refugees, they are not in isolation but in contact with both their nations of origin and of arrival.

What is more, Mahtab's story is imagined by Saba in Iran and told to an Iranian audience, situating Iran and America in relation to each other. As such, her stories also reach across national and geopolitical divides to western readers. Thus, Saba's story, as well as the stories of Mahtab she tells, is one of gaining one's voice through communication with women in Iran, and their stories suggest an expansive or relational way of formulating a moral and political agency. By performing and presenting connective, responsive, and communal stories of Iranian women refugees, the novel imbues them with cross-national political resonance and agency, bringing about a self that narrates itself into cognitive existence within the web of listening others. Instead of being voiceless, these refugee girls gain their own voice by holding on and adding to their connections over the national and cultural borders they cross.

IV. A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea

Toward the end of the novel, Saba acknowledges the need to extricate her life from Mahtab's, and faces the fact that her sister had drowned. However, even when she herself has adapted to American life, she confesses that she cannot give up telling the stories of her twin sister. Still imagining "a closing for Mahtab's story" (465), Saba confesses that "I have banished these immigrant fears through my sister's bit-sized television epiphanies so that I

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could wander the streets as if they were my own" (466). Nevertheless, Saba thinks "I may never be able to shed the skin of the immigrant, put away the dreams of an old Iran that no longer exists, and start belonging somewhere" (465). Also, despite her attempts to "put Mahtab back in the water, many thousands of scoops of teaspoon away—where she belongs" (466), Saba admits that she cannot stop telling stories as it is "too much in her nature" (466). The novel thus refuses the redemptive full closure that Moretti notices in the traditional Bildungsroman genre. Instead of the completion of Mahtab stories, the novel ends with the beginning of the phrase that ends a traditional Iranian story: "Up we went and there was mast…" (466). Saba does not finish this last sentence, making it difficult or irrelevant to decide what is truth and what is lie; what becomes much more important is to imagine a meaningful and flexible connection between the different worlds that helps the one who traverses the chasm in between.

The very title of the novel, "*A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*" highlights and transforms the distance between the sisters separated by life and death, and the distance between the two vastly different cultures and nations, into emotional and political networks. In one of Khanom Basir's resounding stories, Saba, longing for her lost sister, asks "[h]ow many scoops of my teaspoon would get me all the way from here to there?" (47). This innocent and figurative question obscures, rather than strengthens, the symbolic distance not only between death and life but also between America and Iran as Saba imagines Mahtab has become a refugee in America. That is, the title of the novel, taken from Saba's question, prompts a different way of conceiving distance between people and nations—not as severance, but as complex connection—so that a different, multi-layered conceptualization of the sense of belonging and agency thereof may emerge. By thus focusing on the interdependency with cultural and national others, *A Teaspoon* raises the need to re-work the concept of human subjectivity not as a citizen of a nation, but rather as a position in shifting networks that intersect, but arenot contained by, existing borders and boundaries.

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