Beyond the Enigma of the Veil: Representation of Women’s Status in Post-revolutionary Iran by Iranian–American Memoirs

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Abstract

Exilic Iranian memoirs by female writers began to emerge after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and surged after September 11, 2001. The dramatic increase in Iranian–American memoirs, which began after 9/11 signifies a complex relation between publication of this literary genre and mass consumption in a specific historical moment. The present paper offers a thematic analysis of a number of memoirs published by female Iranian–Americans in English from 1979 to 2012. Using Orientalism as a theoretical framework the study finds that Orientalist stereotypes are often used in framing and explaining events and issues related to Iranian women and sexuality under the Islamic Republic. In analyzing texts specific assumptions toward Iranian women will be questioned and discussed with occasional reference to details.

Keywords

memoirs – women – Iranian–Americans – Orientalism – the Islamic Republic

Introduction

Memoirs, as a form of literary genre play a significant role in shaping public opinion, as the literature of any period is in many ways a reflection of its
historical context and social feelings. It situates texts in history and exposes the ways in which historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts (McLeod, 2010). Joseph Massad maintains that, “The ideas and representations that emerge in literary texts generally reflect journalistic and political debates (just as much as television and cinema do) and indeed exercise considerable influence on these media” (2007: 272).

Memoirs are one of the most popular kinds of literary genres published in the United States (Atlas, 1996; Motlagh, 2008; Yagoda, 2010). According to James Atlas, an author and publisher, as early as 1996 the popularity of memoirs has caused a “revolution” in American reading habits (1996: 25). Ben Yagoda asserts that, “total scale in categories of Personal Memoirs, Childhood Memoirs, and Parental Memoirs increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008” (2009: 65). Amy Motlagh maintains that the thirst for “real entertainment in narrative of trauma and recovery has allowed hundreds of new authors to break into the highly competitive arena of commercial publishing” (2008:28). Significantly, a memoir presents itself, and is therefore read as “a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual human experience” (Motlagh, 2008:15). Unlike fiction, memoirs are deemed to have roots in the real world and therefore make certain kinds of truth claims. Couser maintains that this makes two obligations for the memoirist, “historical as well as biographical accuracy toward the people they depict” (2011:10). As a result, unlike novels and other forms of fiction that are entirely imagined, ethics are more important in memoirs.

Beside the general interest of the American public in memoirs, the desire of the public for detailed information about Iran, in the current context of relations between the two countries, has created a booming market for Iranian-American memoirs (Bahramitash, 2005; Whitlock, 2007; Draznik, 2008; Karim & Rahimieh, 2008; Marandi, 2008; Motlagh, 2008; Milani, 2013).

Iranian exilic memoirs began to emerge in the 1980s and surged after September 11, 2001. 70 memoirs have been written and published by Iranian-Americans from 1980 to 2013, 30 of which have been published in the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election. A simple search in online bookstores finds many memoirs by Iranian-Americans, which claim to provide the readers with an authentic personal account of Iranian revolution. Apparently Iranian memoirs have emerged in the right place and at the right time: this maybe realized when one considers three waves of memoirs that followed after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The first wave goes back to the hostage crisis (though the only notable memoir in this period is Not without My Daughter); the second wave was followed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (more specifically with 2003 Azar Nafis’s Reading Lolita); and the third wave began with the aftermath of 2009 Iranian presidential election.
The dramatic increase in Iranian–American memoirs which began after 9/11 signifies a complex relation between publication of memoirs and mass consumption in a specific historical moment. Interestingly it appears that many memoirs make truth claims which makes the reader to read them as history books, which assembly is providing a historical account of post-revolutionary Iran.

Scope of the Work

The present paper offers a thematic analysis of nine memoirs published by female Iranian writers in English from 1979 to 2012.¹ The writers have very

¹ The books include:

different backgrounds and their intentions for writing memoirs as well as their targeted audiences might vary considerably from one to another. Yet all the writers have dedicated significant parts of their memoirs for advancing narratives about women’s status under the Islamic Republic. In order to have a comprehensive analysis of Iranian–American memoirs, this study selected all the memoirs that were reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* and have more than 3 editions till August 2012. The *New York Time* book review is of significance for a number of reasons: the books that were reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* include those memoirs that were published after the 1979 which is important for this study. The *New York Time* book review is also one of the most influential and widely read book review publication in the industry and receives 750 to 1000 books from authors and publishers weekly, of which 20 to 30 are chosen for review (*c-span*, 2006). While selecting memoirs based on the *New York Times Book Review* might exclude works by less-known or more obscure writers, the concern of this study is those that have gained more public visibility and thus possibly have more influence on public opinion. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

**RQ1.** How is social and political status of women in post-revolutionary Iran represented? What issues/events are framed and discussed?

**RQ2.** Are Orientalist stereotypes used for explaining the issues/events?

**RQ3.** Who is speaking? Who among the totality of the population is privileged to speak for the Iranian women?

In this study the operational definition of “Iranian–Americans” is those people who possess Iranian and American dual citizenship or those who are Americans of Iranian ancestry. Meanwhile Marjaneh Satrapi’s memoir (who resides in France) is also included as it gained significant market success and public visibility in the United States. Moreover, Satrapi’s memoir is a part of the educational syllabi in schools and universities across the United States.

It should be noted that while Iranian–American memoirs are received positively by the western audience and welcomed by the contemporary western readership, a number of scholars have criticized such works for their latent and blatant Orientalism: In his book, *Women Write Iran* (2018), Nima Naghibi investigates life narratives of the Iranian women diaspora across a wide variety of genres including memoirs, films, documentary films, and graphic novels.


According to Naghibi, the works revolve around the experience of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which is perceived by many Iranians in diaspora as a traumatic event, who look back to Iran with a deep nostalgia for an idealized past. Naghibi’s book focuses on productions that are favored and welcomed in the West, such as Marjane Satrapi’s best-selling graphic novel *Persepolis*.

In *Jasmine and Stars*, Fatemeh Keshavarz (2007), attempts to provide a counter-narrative to Azar Nafisi’s bestselling memoirs, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In her portrayal of the contemporary Iran, she challenges the systemic Orientalism of Nafisi’s narrative by exploring the rich tradition of Iranian literature, poetry and history. The readers are introduced to modern Iranian female writers and their works, which contradict stereotypical representations of Iranian women in the west.

In his article published by Alahram, *Native Informers and Making of the American Empire* (2006), Hamid Dabashi explains how literature can be hold partially responsible for demonizing Iran and can be used a “key propaganda tool” at the service of US military campaign. In *Constructing an Axis of Evil: Iranian Memoirs in ‘the land of the free’*, Marandi and Pirnajmuddin (2009), also refer to the persistent negative representation of Iran in the Western media and recent trend of “indigenous orientalism” in Iranian–American memoirs.

**Theoretical Frame Work: Orientalism, Feminism and the Third World Woman**

According to Edward Said the discourse of Orientalism assumed a gender-based division between the East and the West in which the East was “feminized” by attributing feminine qualities (1978:188). Said argues that such feminine qualities signified a sensuality which is both desired and feared in the Western imagination. In this context while the Oriental male is feminized, the Oriental female is doubly feminized, in other words double-colonized and is used both as a tool of misrepresentation of the Orient as well as a moral justification for expansion of colonialism.

There have been ambivalent representations of Muslim women over the centuries. While there exist literature and accounts from some of the pre-19th century European travelogues who reported a lack of morality and shamelessness of Muslim women for their revealing clothes and their free mobility (Tavakil-Targhi as cited in Hoodfar) or the women’s power within the domestic domain (Atkinson, 1832; Tucker, 1985), others maintain that with the changing political relations between the East and Europe, the representation of Muslim women in the late 18th and 19th century was reversed: the Orient
was represented as a land subjugated by the male barbarian (an attribute that had roots in Crusades literature) the power of the male Oriental was relied on the maltreatment of women who were reduced to and represented as sex slaves. Thus, images of suppressed Muslim women became a major constituent for the construction of the Orient and had a direct connection to the Western imperialism, particularly that of France and Britain (Said, 1978; Kabbani, 1986).

In her book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), Mohja Kahf historicizes nine centuries of European images of Muslim women, which starts from the medieval and runs to Romantic periods. Despite the wide variety of literary models which Kahf exposes – giantesses, princesses, harlots, and soldiers – she concludes that, “all that Western culture retains today of its own ebullient parade of Muslim women is a supine odalisque, a shrinking-violet virgin, and a veiled victim woman” (1999:179). Accordingly despite some nuances in Orientalism, there is a constant and inseparable association between the Orient and sensuality. The obsession with the harem as a dominant signifier of the Orient in the Orientalist discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was used constantly in popular literature. The Harem had an erotic significance and was perceived as a site for forbidden sexual pleasures as well as a segregated space which separated men from women. Moreover the harem and eroticism associated with it has significance as it depicts the relationship between Oriental women, Oriental men and their Western counterparts. Kahf calls sexual and erotic motifs such as harems and concubines as “motif of enclosure” in which the audience had the image of the jealous Muslim man guarding, veiling, and enclosing the women (1999:105). Sardar pointed out that, “symbolically, the violent and barbaric Muslim male and sensual, passive female, come together to represent the perfect Orient of the Western perception: they fuse together to produce a concrete image of sensuality and despotism and thus inferiority” (1999:48).

Fanciful representations of Eastern women (Said, 1978:7; Sardar, 1999: 43) and their perceived sexual deviancy rendered them as objects of enjoyment for European men and ironically assigned a moral imperative to save Oriental women from the “tyranny” of Oriental men. During the colonial era Orientalist feminism served a purpose: the constructed image of suppressive and cruel Oriental males and submissive Oriental females justified the conquest of eastern lands and even made it a moral imperative. This according to Spivak is the case of “white men saving brown women from brown man” (1999:303). The contemporary example of this view toward the so-called Oriental women is the representation of Afghan and Iraqi women during and after the US and NATO invasion to Afghanistan and Iraq when the depiction of Muslim women
in burqa or niqab (the face covering hijab) was prevalent in many Western and even some Eastern press and media.

Whereas the rhetoric of “saving Muslim women” is often used by feminist Orientalists, the debate around the “third world woman”, the problematic history of the “feminist-as-imperialist” and the so called “civilizing mission” of the colonialists (Gandhi, 1998:83) raises serious doubts about the benign intentions of many Western feminists toward the issue of women’s right in Islamic countries. According to Parvin Paidar (1995) feminist Orientalism basically makes three assumptions: first the assumption of an oppositional binary between the West and the East in which Muslim women are oppressed while their Western counterparts enjoy full freedom in their societies. The second characteristic is the conception that the Oriental women are only victims of a male chauvinistic society and have no agency or resistant role in their social transformations. This approach tends to marginalize the so-called Oriental women and therefore, Muslim women need saviors, i.e., the Westerns, to emancipate them from Muslim men’s tyranny. The third aspect is the construction of a monolithic entity of Muslims and therefore the belief that all Muslim women are living under the same condition and have no unique aspect or identity for themselves (1995: 5–7). Therefore non-western women are represented as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.,” and western women as “educated, modern […] having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanti, 1991:261).

The Ayatollahs vs. Iranian women: Veil and Freedom

The issue of veiled women had long been a manifestation of the West’s Orientalization of Islam. According Leila Ahmad “Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies” (2009:152). Moreover, often and especially in classic Orientalism, the veil is associated with exoticism and sensuality and a symbolic representation of the harem and the inaccessibility of Muslim women.

In a similar trend, in the memoirs the veil and hijab in post-revolutionary Iran are represented as a sign of women oppression under the Islamic Republic. These writers often have a reductive approach toward the hijab in which women’s liberation and “freedom” is reduced to the issue of hijab and hijab is attributed to absence of choice. Accordingly, the “historical facts” that are
presented by many writers about the veil and women’s status in pre and post-revolutionary Iran are often incomplete and partial.

Likewise, usually pre-revolutionary Iran is represented as a modern and progressive society-sometimes with quick references to the regimes deficiencies – with a Shah which had hasten the process of modernization by unveiling women, as well as promoting literacy and employment among Iranian women. This is juxtaposed with religious backwardness and repression of women under a “clerical regime” of the Islamic Republic.

In Reading Lolita in Tehran, Nafisi claims that, “when I was growing up, in the 1960s, there was little difference between my rights and the rights of women in Western democracies” (2003:261). Haleh Esfandiari writes about women’s employment growth, which was rapidly increasing in the 1960s and 1970’s (2011:41–42). Roya Hakakian starts her memoirs with a “historical note” in which she describes the late-Pahlavi Iran as:

Perfectly at peace and on its way to a great future. The nation’s annual growth rate was roughly double the average of other third world countries, and per capita income was on the rise; so were student population and life expectancy. Education and health had improved. The infant mortality rate, malnutrition, endemic diseases, and illiteracy had been reduced (2010:5).

Nahid Rachlin maintains that with the 1979 Iranian Revolution the small gains women had begun under the Shah were set back (2009:283) and that, “now all women were required to wear chadors” (2009: 238). According to Davar Ardalan, “within the days of the revolution of 1979, the clerics took control of the country’s institutions” (2013:244) and “instituted a strict version of Islamic law – they made women wear the veil, brought back harsh punishment and denounced everything Western” (2013:244).

It should be noted the hijab has a long history in pre-Islamic Iran. It is believed (yet debated) that the history and origin of veil goes back to ancient Persia where respectable women were required to cover themselves. When in January 7, 1936 Reza Shah banned wearing hijab, which he considered to be incompatible with modernity, and forcibly removed it many Iranian women refused to appear in public. Many continued to observe hijab; some went out into the streets with hijab and risked being beaten and having it violently pulled off from their heads. The enforcement of unveiling caused serious oppositions and distress among various groups from across society (Salah, 2004). Parvin Paidar argues that Reza Shah’s forceful unveiling of women was not only resisted by most Iranian women, but even by independent socialists,
liberal nationalists, and feminists who were fighting for women’s rights (1995:51–68). During the five years of unveiling enforcement just in one city between two thousand to five thousand people were killed and fifteen hundred were taken captive in the holy city of Mashhad due to the unveiling act (Makki, 1987:281–283).

As a result of people’s resistance in 1941 the policy of unveiling was abandoned. According to Zohreh Sullivan, Reza Shah’s policy of modernization, which was generally seen in the west as a move toward Westernization and industrialization, backlashed and “resulted in poverty and chaos that followed mass migration from country to city” (cited in Smith, 2006: 247). In her view Reza Pahlavi’s policy of unveiling prevented most girls and women from education because they considered hijab as an important component of their identity and piety.

Moreover, the phenomenon of women wearing the hijab in public had begun well before the Iranian 1979 Islamic Revolution. A 1978 Iranian secret police (SAVAK) report, revealed that,

Recently a new trend has emerged among the people of Iran. A number of adolescent girls and young women want to wear the chador and hijab. This phenomenon is noticeable in public places and in the streets. There is no doubt that it signifies a new religious trend.

the Iranian Revolution in SAVAK documents, p.86

Farzaneh Milani also asserts that in the late sixties and seventies a renewed interest in the veil was seen among Iranian women, “not only did traditional women who have never relinquished the practice continue to veil themselves but many educated, hitherto unveiled women, voluntarily took up the veil” (1992: 36); for many people, unveiled women were regarded as symbols of imperialism. Wearing hijab not only was a symbol of disobedience of the regime, but as Milani suggests, it was a way of making a personal statement. With the Iranian Islamic Revolution many women, according to this view, conformed to the hijab in name of national independence and the rejection of corrupt loyalists (1992: 37).

Moreover, while some of the writers (like Nafisi,, Esfandiari, and Hakakian) often associate Mohammad Reza Shah with the Family Law and the Family Protection Acts, in reality these did not improve women’s status as statistics reveal. While Esfandiari writes about the Shah’s, “commitment to the principal that traditional restrictions on women should be removed” (2011:41), the Shah attitude toward women is reflected in an interview with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci:
In a man's life, women count only if they are beautiful and graceful and know how to stay feminine ... and this Women's Lib business, for instance. What do these feminists want? Equality, you say? Indeed! I don't want to seem rude, but ... You may be equal in the eyes of the law, but not, I beg your pardon for saying so, in ability [...] . Women, when they are in power, they are much harsher than men. Much more cruel, much more bloodthirsty.

as cited in Showcross, 1988:202

Whether one agrees with current dress coding or not, in post-revolutionary Iran, woman's social, political, educational and health status changed dramatically. A comparison of women status in pre and post-revolutionary Iran is quite revealing: the literacy rate in 1976 (two years before the Revolution), which was 28.7% rose to 92.4% by 2011. The overall female literacy rate rose from 35.5% in 1976 to 98.4% in 2013 (literacy rate of 15–24 year-olds). 75% of those who successfully University entrance examination and were admitted to public universities in Iran are women (Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2008).

Veiled Women vs. Unveiled Women

The association of the “black chador” with illiteracy and violence and drawing a line between the “enlightened” and “backward” Iranian women is a recurring theme in many Iranian–American memoirs. Often the veil is represented as a dividing line between “fundamentalists” and “backward” women of the Islamic Republic and “modernists” and westernized ones and the former is regularly represented as the inferior. In this approach “freedom” for Iranian women is defined as western clothing and if Iranian women choose to wear the hijab, adhere to Islamic rituals and morality then she is either oppressed and backward or brainwashed and indoctrinated by the Islamic Republic. Accordingly pious Iranian women appear as illiterate, submissive and oppressed beings

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2 In recent years, the ratio of female students grew to comprise 63 percent of the students entering university undergraduate programs. Life expectancy at birth increased from 49 for men and women in 1960 to 72.1 for men and 74.6 for women by 2011. The highest university acceptance rate for women was 68.3% in the medical field for the first time in the history of higher education in Iran. For more details see: Statistical Center of Iran at: http://amar.org.ir/Portals/1/Iran/census-2.pdf.
who admire or aspire for the freedom associated with their “westernized and modernized” counterparts (of which often the memoirist is proudly an embodiment) or as agents of the Islamic Republic who are ideologically indoctrinated and thus equally threatening and hateful.

In Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad* other than chodori women who assaulted her in security pat-downs, the only chadori woman who is referred to with humanized feelings and features is a “black-clad creature” (2007:180) who came from “a traditional, pious family” (2007:181). Moaveni’s representation of her is quite stereotypical: according to Moaveni, she was, “a chadori girl who came from traditional family that usually were kept uneducated and housebound” (2007:181) before the revolution but in post-revolutionary Iran they are allowed “to do something with their lives beside washing dishes and birthing” (2007:181). In Moaveni’s view, “her identity as an independent woman, a photojournalist and a professional in her own right was still wholly vulnerable to the undermining traditions of her family” (2007:183).

In her contact with this “black-clad creature,” Moaveni also makes it clear why she cannot come to a more comprehensive view of Iranian women’s life except for the close circle of her family and friends,

> I didn't know how to include her in my life. It might upset my relatives to bring her over in the evenings, because there would be alcohol around and a stranger in full chador would make anyone edgy, like having a nun in a habit at a cocktail party (2007:182).

In a similar manner Roya Hakakian describes the “black veil” as an outdated garb:

> Initially all eyes were on Mrs. Maroof, the wife of a seemingly modern man, wrapped in such outdated garb as a black veil. Very few women appeared veiled in northern parts of Tehran. The ones who did were mostly maids, and they wore not black but floral-patterned veils [...] instead of religiosity, the floral-patterned veil singled class, mostly lower-middle class, and bad style, since it usually covered an unkempt appearance (2010: 55).

Elsewhere she again refers to Mrs. Maroof’s veil and that her veil “was remnant of an extinct era” (2010: 60). By referring to Reza Shah’s mandatory unveiling of Iranian women she adds that, “her veil was not a symbol of her faith but of the human reluctance to rid oneself of something old and familiar” (2010: 60).
In most of the memoirs, the veil is represented as a cage and bondage that almost “all” women in Iran want to get rid of. Writing about one of her students, Nafisi compares herself (as an unveiled woman) with her veiled student,

Could she ever live the life of someone like me, live on her own, take long walks holding hands with someone she loved, even have a little dog perhaps? She did not know. It was like this veil that meant nothing to her anymore yet without which she would be lost. She had always worn the veil (2003:32)

Moreover, Nafisi claimed that the hijab takes away women’s individual identity turning them into invisible creatures and erasure their personality (2003:143). Early in the memoir Nafisi makes a stark contrast between the veiled and unveiled individuals through two pictures taken from her students which reminds the popular trope of “unveiling the veiled” of the traditional Orientalist discourse. In the first picture, “they are, according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands” (2003: 4). In the second photograph they “have taken off their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and the length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same” (2003: 4).

**Oppositional Binary: I-Who-Have-Made-It and You-Who-Can-not-Make-It**

One of the main features of Orientalist feminism is the oppositional binary between the West and the East in which Eastern women are oppressed while, it is claimed, that their Western counterparts enjoy full freedom in their societies. Trinh Minh-ha explains the established hierarchy between the third world women and their Western counterparts where the white woman plays the role of savior for the Oriental women, “the patronizing attitude towards unfortunate sister creates an insuperable division between I-who-have-made-it and You-who-can-not-make-it” (1989: 86). According to Leela Gandhi the Western feminist approach toward non-western and Oriental women is a type of neo-Orientalism (1999: 88). This means that the constructed discourse surrounding the Orient is for the purpose of the imperial consumption and creates a self-congratulatory and self-consolidating project for the Western feminists. One of the assumptions of Orientalist feminism is that the Occident is progressive
and an ideal place for women to live, while the Orient is backward, uncivilized, and thus the worst place for women.

Jasmin Darznik maintains that return narratives of many Iranian–American memoirists, “depend on a sustained and heavily dramatized opposition between Iran and the United States as well as a strict division between their authors’ Iranian and American selves” (2008: 57). The dichotomy of the West as liberator and the Islamic Republic as oppressor can be seen in many Iranian–American memoirs which regularly portray the majority of Iranian women as ignorant, uneducated and tradition bound with no control over their own lives and no freedom to make decisions. Women’s status in Iran is often juxtaposed with western women or those who were “fortunate enough” to leave Iran for the West and commonly, the memoirists emphasize on their “superior” position vis-a'-vis the Iranian women about whom they are writing.

Many Iranian–American memoirists see themselves as the heroes in saving Iranian women. Their accounts of their adventures and heroic resistance seem appealing for the reading public in the West. Many of the female Iranian–American writers assume that it is the United States or Western countries (and themselves as representative of western democracy and liberation in Iran) that can bring “freedom” to Iran and Iranian women. For instance, Moaveni describes herself “as a student of liberal education, taught to apply my political beliefs to my everyday life—to recycle and vote, to respect picket lines and observe boycotts—how could I not take a personal stand against the repressive veil?” (2007: 170). After presenting the readers with all sorts of contemptuous descriptions she associates with veiled Iranian women, she feels that she has the responsibility to save them, “did I not owe it to the thousands of Afghani women, veiled by force under the Taliban, the millions of Iranian women who had no choice, to take a stand, when I did?” (2007: 171).

Bahrampour repeatedly compares her American mother with the traditional, superstitious and uneducated the Iranian women of her father’s family. According to Bahrampour her American mother, “is the only adult in my family who knows anything” (2000:127) and though she is not a physician “if someone was sick she was often called upon to give a diagnosis, which everyone listened to with respectful nods” (2000:27). Whereas the Iranian women of her memoir are referred to as “crowd of strange, shrieking women” (2000:29) with their “old wives tales” (2000:86) and strange stories about religion (2000:102) and the jinns (2000:45–64), Tara’s American mother is talented in skills, that are antithesis to Iranian women (2000:53).

In Lipstick Jihad Azdadeh Moaveni constantly expresses her sense of superiority when she compares herself with Iranian women whom she claims are always jealous of her as they lack her freedom and independence, “the women
would be catty and pretend to admire my job, while secretly resenting me for having an independence they never had" (2007:119).

She compares notions of marriage, love and femininity in Iran and the US to conclude the superiority and sincerity of the latter. Her words of choice is of significance: words such as “intense”, “extravagant,” “traditional,” “tribal” are associated with Iranians while “tolerant,” “gentle,” and “fresh” with the Americans:

Ironically it was my American side that was helping me cope with Iran […]. You had to promise to adhere to tradition, respect boundaries, pretend a great deal, and keep yourself decently codified at all times. You were not entitled to love, it seemed, simply by being who you were but by fulfilling expectations […] American-style love, in contrast, seemed more tolerant, with more gentle approach to the individual at its core. My American friends pretty much lived their lives as fresh endeavors, unburdened by the feeling that resumes and relationships should make tribal and dynastic contributions to the family (2007:136).

Moreover, The dichotomy of the West as liberator and the Islamic Republic as oppressor can be seen in some of the memoirs where the female memoirists suggest that the United States or the West are epitomes of freedom for Iranian women and their refuge from the suppression and backwardness of the Islamic Republic or Iranian men.

In *My Name is Iran* Davar Ardalan describes her life in Iran which depicts a daily routine mainly summarized in her domestic affairs; her main duty is to keep all his husband’s relatives happy, “he [her husband] has five sisters and one brother and it is my task to keep them all happy and in smiles” (2013:167). According to Ardalan no matter how hard she tried to immerse herself in “Islamic Iran” she was “never going to be accepted as being ‘pure Iranian’” (2013:193). For, she claims, that culture required “a woman to be childlike, helpless, and passive, which is how a female is accepted as being ‘pure Iranian’-obedient, submissive, someone who does not step out of her role” (2013: 193). Thus, she states, “I had just enough ‘foreign’ blood in me; my independence and ‘fieriness’ would not let me fit the cultural mold” (2013: 193). Though after the revolution she started to work outside home as a news anchor in *IRIB*3 and translator at different conferences but she found the job opportunity “an excellent propaganda point for the regime” (2013:176). Like Moaveni, it is her American side that comes to her help and rescues her from Iran’s backwardness.

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3 The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.
With the help and inspiration she gets from her “American grandmother’s spirit,” Ardalan decides to go to the US where “I felt we could grow” (2013:195). Upon arriving to the US she evolves from a traditional woman into a modern one. By removing her veil, she feels a sense of both physical and spiritual emancipation:

The same desire to remove all inner veils covering my spiritual heart, I began to remove these veils, the outer as well, because they prevented me from inward. I now was able to go much deeper inwardly and question who I had been, who I had become, and who I wanted to be (2013: 212).

It is after her immigration to the US that she is able to pursue her newfound passion for journalism and communication (2013: 215) and turn into an Iranian women’s right activist (2013: 247).

Azar Nafisi draws the binary opposition by representation of women as victims of state violence of the Islamic Republic and the democratic spirit that she finds in the Western novels and appreciated by her female students. She covers mainly nineteenth-century English literature that was written at the time when Britain was at the height of its imperialist mission. While the literature of this period is an important topic of post-colonial literary criticism due to colonial ethos, Nafisi, paradoxically attempts to liberate Iranian women by reading these novels. Her female students, sitting in Nafisi’s home in Tehran of 1995, identify with Lolita and Elizabeth Bennet

There was a certain innocence with which we read these books; we read them apart from our own history and expectations. Like Alice running after the White Rabbit and jumping into the hole. This innocence paid off: I do not think that without it we could have understood our own inarticulateness. Curiously, the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities, about which we felt so helplessly speechless (2003: 38–39).

Throughout her memoir, the few Iranian characters that Nafisi represents positively are those who were either residing in the West or were educated there (like Yassi’s uncle). Moreover, her female students often express the love and obsession with the West. According to Nafisi her students “tend to look at the West too uncritically; all that is good in their eyes comes from America or Europe, from chocolates and chewing gums to Austin and the Declaration of Independence” (2003: 312). At the end all Nafisi’s students are either trying to escape Iran by getting divorce (2003: 286) and leaving for the West or are
advised to do so, “Don’t stay here and don’t marry anyone who’ll have to stay here. You’ll rot” (2003: 286).

In *Persian Girls* Nahid Rachlin juxtaposes her life as a woman who escaped Iran and led a successful life in the West with that of her sister who could not leave Iran and thus ended in a tragic fate. Rachlin leaves Iran in early the 1960s, attends university in the United States and marries an American professor. Her sister Pari who had always dreamed of going to America and become an actress ends in depression and suicide when forced into marriage with an abusive husband. The whole story revolves around a theme where the two sisters attempt to escape both Iran and their domineering fathers and husbands. According to Cyrus Amiri, “Rachlin’s overall impression of women’s lives in Iran is very bleak and depressing,” either they are forced to marriage, killed or stoned by their husbands, imprisoned by their fathers and husband or betrayed by them (2006:167, 232, 65, 96, 167, 135). For these reasons, Rachlin does not allow her American-born daughter to come into contact with Iran,

She knew very little about my culture. She had never been to Iran, never met Pari, Maryam, or my parents, and didn't speak a word of Farsi. In my attempt to protect her from the harsh reality of my own culture, I hadn't introduced her even to the good things (2006: 247).

Like Nafisi, the only characters that Rachlin represents positively were those who have some familiarity with Euro-American culture, and Western language and literature (like Pari, Majid, and Uncle Ahmad).

**Voicing the Unvoiced**

While Iranian–American memoirs are not “political memoirs” – “to recount the important political engagements” (Egerton, 1994) or political history of a country – the books often make truth claims about historical events and thus are read as historical books or ethnographical narratives that surpasses the personal experience of the writer (Rastgar, 2006).

According to Bahramitash, Many writers claim to have written their memoirs as a result of their access to the private lives of a large number of Iranian women. The images are claimed be derived both from observations as well as writers own background as Iranians who are born/raised/educated in the West. However, when one reads the memoirs more closely it becomes clear that such accounts are based on the memoirist's limited personal perspective (2005: 231).
The claims of the female writers as representative of Iranian women living inside Iran and their daily life and experiences are often undermined with the writers' own descriptions of their “elite” personal backgrounds, their education, and their residence in the West. Azar Nafisi's family was among the country’s elite during the Pahlavi dynasty. Afshiné Latifi's father was a senior military figure in the Shah's “Guard'e Shahanshahi”. Roya Hakakian, was from a Jewish family who had little interaction with other segments of Iranian society. Azadeh Moaveni, was born in the United States and had her first travel to Iran before writing *Lipstick Jihad*. Marjane Satrapi went to a French school before the revolution. Tara Bahrampour went to an international school in Tehran and, for the most part, grew up in the United States. Ardalan had attended an American-style school during the time of the Shah (2013: 186) and most of her relatives were prominent figures before the Revolution (2013: 248). Haleh Esfandiari went to a Catholic school and her first language was German (2011: 27).

According to Rastgar, whereas the writers cannot be taken as representatives of average Iranian women, in their memoirs, “they are invested in describing the lives of various women under the Islamic Republic through their stories” (2006: 108). Though they often write about the experiences of Iranian public at large, their representation of Iran if accepted as accurate, can be considered as description of life of specific social strata of Iranian women in both pre and post-revolutionary Iran.

**Conclusion**

The dichotomy of the West as women’s liberator and the Islamic Republic as women oppressor and dividing people in to religious vs. secular, veiled vs. unveiled, educated in the West vs. those who were educated in Iran are among major themes in the memoirs. The binary opposition between the two can be traced with regard to cultural, social and political representations of women’s status in post-revolutionary Iran. Arguments and stories consistently have such implications, for instance in representation of hijab and so-called westernized vs. traditional Iranian men and women, and such dichotomies are stressed upon. Thus, models are being made and conveyed that contrast “us” with “them” by emphasizing on “our” modernity, tolerance, intellect, and “their” backwardness, brutality, illiteracy and threat.

Narrating negative events as personally experienced and giving plausible details about negative features of the events was a prominent characteristic of the analyzed texts. Such stories focus on the (usually negative) characteristics,
and function to further an argument to persuade the readers about the abnormality of the “other”. They often tend to depict the “other” as inhuman or inferior by attributing negative and unacceptable personality traits. In this approach the stated personal experiences of an individual serve as the credible premises of negative conclusions such as “religious men in Iran are sexually perverts” or “women are repressed by the Islamic Republic”, etc.

Consequently, Iranian women, as parts of the “third world woman”, are often represented as a singular monolithic subject. In such a representation, Iranian women are portrayed largely as, “sexually constrained … ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.” (Mo- hanty, 1989:56) while the Western or Westernized women are represented as the opposite. The redemption and liberation of these women is only possible through the West.

References

Beyond the Enigma of the Veil


