

Unveiling the Middle Eastern Memoir:  
Reconfiguring Images of Iranian Women Through Post-9/11 Memoirs

by

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Winter 2013



For my sister.

## Acknowledgments

This thesis represents the composite of my three foremost academic interests: literature, women's rights and advocacy, and the Middle East. In the summer of 2011, just before beginning my junior year of college, I spent two months studying and researching the graphic memoir *Persepolis* as a participant in the Summer Social Sciences and Humanities Fellowship through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP). This experience not only helped me to hone my skills as a writer and researcher, but also allowed me to explore my interest in the ways in which Iranian women's memoirs have been shaped by politics both in their native land and within the United States. I am forever grateful to the UROP program for this unique opportunity to delve further into my studies and discover the questions that I most wanted to answer in this thesis. More specifically, I owe a great deal of thanks to Jennifer Peacock for advising me throughout this process and for serving as a mentor throughout my college career.

I am grateful to Juan Cole, the unparalleled lecturer and teacher, whose Middle Eastern studies courses provided me with the knowledge and expertise I needed in order to create a project of this scope. Thanks are also due to Jennifer Wenzel for offering countless helpful comments on my preliminary drafts of this thesis. I also must thank David Halperin, my advisor, and the professor who first recommended that I apply to the honors program. David's keen insight and lively personality made this process truly enjoyable.

I would like to thank Roya Hakakian, Afschineh Latifi, and Allison Saltzman for allowing me to interview them. By offering insight into the writing/artistic process, these women provided an added layer of complexity and depth to this already fascinating discussion. Thanks are also due to Azar Nafisi and Marjane Satrapi for their stirring and powerful memoirs. Their words have moved me, and their stories have inspired me.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I would like to thank my family. My parents and siblings, Megan and Matthew, are the most important people in my life, providing endless

motivation, laughter, and love. Thanks are also due to my extended family. Though this thesis explores the memoirs of Iranian women, I was initially compelled to write about the Middle East as a result of my own stance as the daughter of an Iraqi immigrant. My father immigrated to the United States in 1967 and, after much hard work, was able to successfully fund and assist the immigration of his parents, brother, and seven sisters. Throughout my life, I have known what it is to be a part of a strong, dependable, and, indeed, female-dominated Middle Eastern family. Their warmth, compassion, and support has been truly invaluable not only throughout this thesis process, but throughout my life.

## Abstract

In the aftermath of the tragic September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, the American media was flooded with images, videos, and texts depicting scenes of brutality and oppression among Middle Easterners. Among these media venues, the American literary landscape saw perhaps the most substantial influx of works generated by women. Many of these female-centric works were memoirs, documenting the lives of Middle Eastern women from the perspectives of Middle Eastern women; in so doing, these authors provided insight into a world and a population so often stereotyped, but so rarely truthfully and realistically represented.

This thesis considers the complex relationship between Iranian female authors and American consumers in the literary marketplace, functioning within a post-9/11 political environment. I analyze four memoirs written by Iranian women: *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, by Azar Nafisi (2003); *Persepolis 1* and *2*, by Marjane Satrapi (2003, 2004); *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*, by Roya Hakakian (2004); and *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran*, by Afschineh Latifi and ghostwriter Pablo F. Fenjves (2005). By conducting an analysis of each memoir in conjunction with an examination of the texts' respective audiences, we may gain a better understanding of the ways in which the political environment informs both the production and consumption of literature in the United States.

The first chapter of this thesis seeks to explore potential reasons why *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the graphic memoirs, *Persepolis 1* and *2* were so popular with American audiences. In a post-9/11 world, American readers approached literature about the Middle East with particular expectations and desires relating to three primary constructs: exoticism, gender, and literary aesthetics. I argue that these memoirs exceeded American readers' expectations and desires within each category, thus creating mass appeal.

Chapter Two considers the ways in which the cover illustrations of the four memoirs reinforce negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern women among American consumers. In spite of the largely progressive nature of these memoirs, the presence of veiled women on the covers may be explained by the pervasiveness of negative perceptions of the Middle East in Western media; these negative stereotypes influenced the expectations that the American public held towards Middle Eastern women and the way they "should" look. This chapter seeks to prove that the publishing industry, playing off the stereotype of the *hijab* as a symbol of female oppression, featured women in veils on the covers of these otherwise feminist memoirs as a deliberate marketing technique.

The third chapter of this thesis addresses reviews of the memoirs featured on both the publishers' websites and in the print edition of each book, relative to reviews written by average American consumers on Amazon.com. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, the relationship between the United States and the Middle East was discussed largely in Manichean terms in the American media. This language prompted many critics to describe within their reviews the relationship between Iran and the United States in terms of "good" and "evil." In this chapter, I will prove that analyzing reviews is important because critics — both formal and informal — have the power to influence not only whether or not American consumers decide to read a text, but also *how* they read a text.

Throughout this thesis, my analyses and arguments focus primarily on *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis*. This design is due not only to the fact that these texts were bestsellers both in the United States and abroad, but also because each text skews the conventional memoir format in an interesting and nuanced way — *Reading Lolita* is structured around Western novels, while *Persepolis* employs stark graphics to reinforce the storyline and provide an additional layer of insight. *Journey From the Land of No* and *Even After All This Time*, both lesser-known texts, help to round out my arguments. I believe that these four works, in association with one another, provide an adequate overview of Iranian female-generated memoirs in the American literary marketplace in the five-year period immediately following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks.

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## INTRODUCTION

On the evening of January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush prepared to speak to the country in a televised State of the Union Address. The president, who was in relatively high spirits due to the displacement of the Taliban from Afghanistan in late 2001, addressed the subject of “outlaw regimes,” including Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. Bush stated:

States like [Iraq, North Korea, and Iran], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.<sup>1</sup>

According to the president, the war in Afghanistan was only the beginning. With the “axis of evil” metaphor, the Bush administration set out to posit Iraq, North Korea, and Iran — entire nations and their respective peoples — not only as our enemies in the broader war on terror, but as instigators of veritable “evil” against the United States’ attempts at good. The metaphor, which was coined by the president’s speechwriter, David Frum, was intended to prompt Americans to make comparisons between modern “terror states” and the Axis powers of World War II. Indeed, in his insider book about the Bush administration, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (2003), Frum notes, “To defeat bin Laden, Americans would have to counter his Islamist ideology not with the barely comprehended values of some hypothetical Islam, but with America’s own values of liberty and equality.”<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the Bush administration sought to increase American investment in a war against the ever-elusive concept of “terror.”

The years 2001 and 2002 may today be viewed as historical milestones in shifting American perceptions of Middle Eastern nations. Immediately following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks,

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address, The United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., 29 January 2002 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> David Frum, The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush (New York: Random House, 2003): 226.

the American public exhibited a generalized anxiety towards the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> After the president's January 2002 State of the Union Address, the formerly held anxiety towards Iran became imbued with a sense of curiosity towards this largely unknown but (as of late) much-feared region. This tense political and social climate ultimately spurred a literary environment conducive not only to the publication of memoirs by Iranians in exile, but also to the reception of these texts by an intrigued American readership. For those Americans lacking a background in Middle Eastern history and politics, memoirs provided both an entertaining and pedagogical medium through which to explore the culture.<sup>4</sup> By allowing readers to empathize and identify with the author's unique experiences, memoirs have the capacity to provide a level of emotional depth to reading not often found in textbooks.

In her article, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series" (2006), published in the journal *Iranian Studies*, Amy Malek asserts, "Memoirs by first- and second-generation Iranian women first appeared in the late 1980s, but did not find considerable media attention [at that time]."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, from the late 1980s up until the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, only four Iranian women and two Iranian men published memoirs.<sup>6</sup> After

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<sup>3</sup> I do not discuss all the nations that comprise the Middle East in this thesis, but rather I use the phrase as a blanket term. Few Americans tend to discern the differences between the nations that comprise the Middle East and "The Middle East" as a monolithic (negatively connoted) entity. It is this generalized, mass-media perception of the region that will be discussed in this thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Nahid Mozaffari, "Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran by Roya Hakakian; Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran by Azadeh Moaveni; Embroideries by Marjane Satrapi," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34.1 (2006): 517.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series," *Iranian Studies* 39.3 (2006): 361.

<sup>6</sup> Memoirs written by Iranian women between the late 1980s and the year 2000 included Shusha Guppy's memoirs, Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1988), which was re-released in 2004, and A Girl in Paris (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1992), which was re-released in 2007; Sattareh Farman Farmaian, Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from her Father's Harem Through the Islamic Revolution (London: Bantam Press, 1992), which was re-released in 2006; Tara Bahrapour, To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1999); and Gelareh Asayesh, Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

September 11<sup>th</sup>, the American literary marketplace was virtually flooded with memoirs written by Iranians, specifically Iranian women. In the five years following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, no less than eighteen memoirs written by Iranians were published by 14 different publishing houses; in this interval, women wrote nearly three times as many memoirs as men.<sup>7</sup> While memoirs by women produced during this period typically focus on “personal revelations, self-reflection, positionality, and identity,” memoirs by male authors often revolve around political themes and discussions of political events, persecution, and exile.<sup>8</sup>

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Memoirs written by Iranian men during the same time interval included Abbas Milani, Tale of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1996); and Manucher Farmanfarmaian and Roxane Farmanfarmaian, Blood & Oil: Memoir of Iran, from the Shah to the Ayatollah (New York: Random House, 1997), which was re-released as Blood & Oil: A Prince’s Memoir of Iran from the Shah to the Ayatollah in 2005. All information provided in this footnote is based upon non-scientific research I conducted on Amazon.com

<sup>7</sup> Memoirs written by Iranian women during the five years following September 11<sup>th</sup> included Nesta Ramazani, The Dance of the Rose and Nightingale (Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East) (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 2002); Firoozeh Dumas, Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America (New York: Random House, 2003); Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (New York: Random House, 2003); Farideh Goldin, Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman (Waltham: Brandeis 2003); Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004); Roya Hakakian, Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004); Farah Pahlavi, An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah – A Memoir (New York: Miramax, 2004); Azadeh Moaveni, Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005); Afschineh Latifi, Even After All This Time: a Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran (New York: ReganBooks, 2005); Ghazal Omid, Living in Hell: A True Odyssey of a Woman’s Struggle in Islamic Iran Against Personal and Political Forces (Oklahoma: Park Avenue Publishers, 2005); Nahid Rachlin, Persian Girls: A Memoir (New York: Tarcher, 2006); and Shirin Ebadi and Azadeh Moaveni, Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope (New York: Random House, 2006).

Memoirs written by Iranian men during the same time interval included Manouchehr Ganji, Defying the Iranian Revolution: From a Minister to the Shah to a Leader of Resistance (Westport: Praeger, 2002); Masoud Banisadr, Masoud: Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel (London: Saqi Books, 2004); Vartan Gregorian, The Road to Home: My Life and Times (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Said, Landscapes of a Distant Mother (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Ghasem Ghani, A Man of Many Worlds: The Diaries and Memoirs of Dr. Ghasem Ghani (Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2005). All information provided in this footnote is based upon non-scientific research I conducted on Amazon.com.

<sup>8</sup> Malek 361.

The recent influx and, certainly, success of memoirs written by Iranian women in the American literary marketplace is nothing short of a phenomenon. In a personal interview with Roya Hakakian, an Iranian-American journalist and author of the 2004 memoir, *Journey from the Land of No*, Hakakian offered me her own explanation for the recent surge of Iranian memoirs written by women. “I think we are witnessing a phenomenon which is really based in the fact that the victims in the Middle East are women and the major roadblock in the Middle East to peace, security, and democracy is misogyny. So it’s not surprising that women are becoming more forceful and, basically, the voice for change.”<sup>9</sup> Although Hakakian wholly attributes this trend in literary production and publication to women’s progress in the Middle East, I would argue that this progress should not be regarded as the sole explanation for the seeming preponderance of female authorship. I assert that the post-9/11 geopolitical environment — and its implicit capacity to shape the wants and desires of American consumers — ultimately created a space for these women’s voices to be heard. Additionally, it is also conceivable that the American public found memoirs written by Iranian women somehow more acceptable or, at the very least, less threatening than memoirs written by Iranian men, ironically subscribing to the stereotype (so often disparaged by Americans) of Iran as a sexist nation. In this same line of thought, the largely positive reception of Iranian female memoirs by American readers may also reflect an underlying desire to spread Western values; by embracing Iranian women who assume the less “traditional” role of author (as opposed to wife and mother), American readers may feel as though they are implicitly promoting feminism and gender equality in the Middle East.

The surge in Iranian female authorship may also be considered in the context of the specific genre in which these women are writing. Sarah Brouillette describes the importance of the origins of the postcolonial author (including, certainly, Middle Eastern female authors) in her 2007 text,

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<sup>9</sup> Roya Hakakian, Personal Interview, Skype, 8 January 2013.

*Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Brouillette writes, “The postcolonial author has emerged as a profoundly complicit and compromised figure whose authority rests, however uncomfortably, in the nature of his connection to the specificity of a given political location.”<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, a Middle Eastern female’s most authoritative voice may be heard when she tells a story specific to her “political location” — that is, when she describes her own daily existence as a woman in the Middle East. This autobiographical format also likely represented the most viable outlet for success for these women in the Western literary marketplace in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, when interest in the Middle East and, more specifically, in the lives of its marginalized citizens, reached its apex.

This thesis considers the complex relationship between Iranian female authors and American consumers in the literary marketplace, functioning within a post-9/11 political environment. In the chapters to follow, I analyze four memoirs written by Iranian women: *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, by Azar Nafisi (2003); *Persepolis 1* and *2*, by Marjane Satrapi (2003, 2004);<sup>11</sup> *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*, by Roya Hakakian (2004); and *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran*, by Afschineh Latifi and ghostwriter Pablo F. Fenjves (2005). I have elected to work with these particular texts for several reasons.

The prominent publishing houses, HarperCollins and Random House, published these memoirs within the five-year period following September 11<sup>th</sup>; as a result, these texts were initially brought to the attention of American readers during a time when negative stereotypes and

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Persepolis* was originally published in France in four separate volumes between 2000 and 2003. Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, published the English translation of *Persepolis* in two volumes. *Persepolis 1: The Story of a Childhood* was published in 2003, and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* was published in 2004. In 2007, *Persepolis* was released in a single volume titled, *The Complete Persepolis*.

misconceptions of the Middle East were nearly ubiquitous in Western culture.<sup>12</sup> In spite of their similar dates of publication, the texts have varied significantly in terms of their popularity. While the memoirs *Reading in Tehran* and *Persepolis 1* and *2* were *New York Times* bestsellers, *Journey From the Land of No* and *Even After All This Time* are significantly less well known. This discrepancy provides us with the opportunity to draw interesting conclusions about literary popularity. By conducting a careful analysis of each text in conjunction with an examination of their respective audiences, we may gain a better understanding of the ways in which the political environment informs both the production and consumption of literature penned by Iranian women in the West.

My interest in these four particular texts is due, in large part, to the fact that they all share one common theme: each memoir depicts a female's experiences living in Iran during the years surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The lone exception to this observation is the second volume of *Persepolis*, which is set predominantly in the West in the years following the Revolution and involves Satrapi interacting with Westerners. As a result, *Persepolis 2* lends itself less to this thesis, and, therefore, will be discussed only briefly in my analyses. The post-9/11 popularity of memoirs set in Iran in the late 1970s allows for an interesting comparison between two important historical moments in both American and Iranian history: The Islamic Revolution and the post-9/11 global war on terror. For most Americans, the history of modern American-Iranian relations begins in 1979, the year of the Iran Hostage Crisis; indeed, the Crisis functions as an important event in each of the memoirs, not only for the impact it had on Americans, but also for its effect on Iranians and the rest of the world at large. From November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981, 52 Americans were held hostage by a group of Islamist students and militants who seized the American Embassy in Tehran as

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<sup>12</sup> In Amir Marvasti and Karyn D. McKinney's 2004 text Middle Eastern Lives in America (Perspectives on a Multiracial America), the authors use focus groups and interviews as evidence for their claim that Americans with Middle Eastern heritage, specifically Arab and Iranian Americans, face hostility and suspicion in their daily interactions with one another and with "white" Americans that is not experienced by any other ethnic group in post-9/11 America.

a symbol of their support for the Islamic Revolution. Images of blindfolded American journalists became standard fare on evening news broadcasts, constructing a televised tragedy for a horrified American audience.<sup>13</sup> As Islamic radicals took center stage in American news outlets, the public's perception of Iran as an ally and friend changed dramatically. The media's inundation of the American public with negative images of the Middle East fostered anti-Iranian sentiment, spurring a series of protests against the presence of Iranians on American soil. Memoirs written by Iranians describing their experience living in Iran in 1979, reminded Americans, once again, of this crucial moment in history.



**Figure 1 (left): American Media Coverage of Day 51 of the Iran Hostage Crisis. Figure 2 (right): Protests in the United States Against Iranians Living on American Soil.**  
*Photo Credits: Sara Katz, Ph.D. Student, History, University of Michigan: Ann Arbor.*

Among the memoirs I consider, perhaps the most fundamental to my analyses is Azar Nafisi's literature-framed text, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003). In it, Nafisi shapes her narrative around the study of English Literature in post-revolutionary Iran. The memoir chronicles her life in Iran from 1979 to 1997. Born in Iran, Nafisi spent much of her childhood in Switzerland before moving to the United States in order to obtain her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from the University of Oklahoma. She returned to Iran in 1979 and remained there until 1997, when she returned to the United States. The majority of the memoir focuses on the

<sup>13</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006): 70.

author's experiences teaching English Literature at the University of Tehran after the Revolution. Throughout the book, Nafisi becomes frustrated with the university after Islamic fundamentalist students argue that the novels she teaches, including F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Henry James' *Daisy Miller*, should be censored because they are symbols of "Western decadence."<sup>14</sup> The university also forces women to wear the now-mandatory *hijab*. Nafisi refuses to wear the veil, which leads to her expulsion from the university. In 1995, Nafisi fulfills a lifelong dream: for one morning each week, she opens her home to a group of committed students for a discussion of "forbidden" Western literature. Their textual analyses of literature lead to dialogues on issues pertinent to their everyday lives, including the veil, issues of marriage and marital equality, and censorship within the Islamic Republic. The memoir ends in the year 1997, as the author prepares to immigrate to the United States with her husband and children. Nafisi ultimately decides to leave Iran because she believes there are more "choices and possibilities" in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

As in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, *Persepolis* (2003, 2004) also chronicles life in the Islamic Republic. The first volume begins in 1979, just before Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi is overthrown. Through stark black-and-white images and hand-scrawled prose, Satrapi documents her life from ages 10 to 14 as an only child raised by affluent and progressive parents in Tehran. "Marji," as the author designates her childhood self, appears more inquisitive and intellectual than most children her age: she reads excessively, referencing Marx, Descartes, and other notable thinkers. As she enters her teenage years, she indulges in more "typical" activities: experimenting with fashion, listening to pop music, and attending her first party. These moments are set against the tumultuous backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war. By the year 1984, Marji's parents begin to fear that their daughter's Western tendencies and outspokenness at school will cause her to be

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<sup>14</sup> Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003): 193.

<sup>15</sup> Nafisi 316.

persecuted — and, indeed, possibly executed — for speaking her mind against the new government regime; as a result, they send her abroad. *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* begins in Vienna. As an outsider in a new country, Marji undergoes the emotional and physical changes of adolescence without the guidance or support of her parents. When she ultimately decides to return to Iran, Marji's guilt over abandoning her country during wartime propels her into a crippling period of depression, culminating in an attempt at suicide. The memoir ends in 1994 with a recently divorced Marji standing in Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran, preparing to leave her country again, this time, for France. *Persepolis* was made into a successful animated-featured film in 2007. Satrapi wrote and co-directed the Academy Award-nominated movie alongside acclaimed French filmmaker and graphic artist, Vincent Paronnaud.

Afschineh Latifi's memoir, *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (2005), may be analyzed alongside Satrapi's memoir, as both women were born into affluent families. The story chronicles Latifi's life from 1976, when she was 7 years old, to 2005, when she was 35. Latifi begins her memoir with an account of her father's execution by Khomeini's soldiers in May of 1979. Latifi's father was a colonel under Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The author describes her life with her parents and three siblings before the Revolution as one of privilege and stability, living in a wealthy neighborhood in Tehran and attending private school. After the Revolution, however, their lives change dramatically. The memoir chronicles Latifi's mother's struggles to provide for her family after her husband's execution. Committed to providing her children with a premier education, Latifi's mother sends Afschineh and her sister, Afsaneh, to Austria where they are immediately ostracized. In 1982, Latifi's mother moves the girls to America where they live with their uncle, Dai'e Mammad, a man who ultimately resents their presence in his already crowded home. In 1987, the girls' mother and brothers are finally given permission to immigrate to America. With their family reunited, the Latifi children focus on their education: Afschineh graduates from college, attends law school, and pursues her career as an intellectual

property lawyer in New York City. Her sister attends medical school, while her brothers, Ali and Amir, attend law and medical school, respectively. The memoir ends in 2005 with the family happily reunited in America, living under one roof in an apartment building in New York City.

The final memoir under consideration in this thesis is Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004). Hakakian is unique among the three aforementioned authors in that she is a Jewish Iranian-American. The story begins in the wake of the 1999 pro-reform uprisings by students in Iran. As described in the memoir, a *New York Times* editorial writer contacts Hakakian at her office at the CBS show *60 Minutes* and asks her to describe her experience living in Tehran after the 1979 Revolution. This incident inspires Hakakian to share her story. Her narrative chronicles her life in Iran from the ages of 9 to 18. Hakakian and her family become disillusioned with the Revolution after realizing that the revolutionaries' cries for liberty would not extend to non-Muslims. In post-Revolutionary Iran, the family is subjected to anti-Semitism at the hands of other Iranians. In one disturbing scene, the words "Johouds [a slang term for Jew meaning 'dirty'] Get Lost!"<sup>16</sup> and a swastika are scribbled in graffiti on the building across the street from the Hakakian family home. This hate crime forces the family to sell their home and move to a different neighborhood. In spite of the discrimination she faces in her neighborhood and at school, Hakakian finds ways to express herself. She excels in her writing classes at school and becomes a member of the Jewish Iranian Students Organization, a group that provides a safe haven in which to discuss both domestic and international events from the perspective of Iranian Jews. However, by 1984, the strain of living in Iran takes a toll on Hakakian and her family. The memoir ends with Hakakian's father announcing that he has decided to move the family to America.

Certain key terms will be utilized frequently throughout this thesis and my intent should, therefore, be clarified in these early pages. Perhaps the most important — and, indeed, frequent —

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<sup>16</sup> Roya Hakakian, *Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004): 134.

theoretical term I employ in this thesis is “Orientalism.” Edward Said, the prominent Palestinian-American literary theorist and a founding figure in the field of Postcolonial literary criticism, defined Orientalism broadly as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’”<sup>17</sup> Throughout Said’s arguments, the Orient refers to “the East,” while the Occident refers to “the West.” In Orientalist rhetoric, the Orient is not discussed in detail as a specific entity, but rather is constructed as distinct from the Occident as a result of an imbalance of power. In this context, the more powerful Occident is depicted as more rational and, ultimately, superior to the less-powerful Orient. Said addresses power by arguing that, “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony...”<sup>18</sup> Employing Said’s definition, I will be utilizing the term “Orientalism” not only within my analyses of the memoirs, but also in my discussion of modern American-Iranian relations.

The word “paratext” is also an important term for this thesis. According to the literary theorist Gerard Genette, “Paratexts are those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader: titles, forewords, epigraphs, and publishers’ jacket copy are part of a book’s private and public history.”<sup>19</sup> This term will be utilized in Chapter Two’s analysis of the front covers of the memoirs.

The first chapter of this thesis seeks to explore potential reasons why Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Marjane Satrapi’s two-volume graphic memoir, *Persepolis 1* and *2*, were more popular in the United States than Roya Hakakian’s memoir *Journey From the Land of No*, and Afschineh Latifi’s memoir *Even After All This Time*. In the post-9/11 literary market, American

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978): 2.

<sup>18</sup> Said 5.

<sup>19</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1987): i.

readers approach texts about the Middle East with particular expectations and desires, most of which relate to three primary constructs: exoticism, gender, and literary aesthetics. I argue that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis* exceeded American readers' expectations and desires within each category, thus creating mass appeal.

Chapter Two considers the ways in which the cover illustrations of the four memoirs reinforce negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern women among American consumers. Each of these covers presents an image of (a) veiled Iranian woman/women, in spite of the fact that the texts themselves describe the lives of progressive women who wear Western attire and obtain a Western education.<sup>20</sup> The presence of veiled females on the covers may be explained by the pervasiveness of negative representations of the Middle East in the Western media, primarily with regards to the “war on terror” and the disenfranchisement of Middle Eastern women. These media representations influenced the expectations that the American public held towards Middle Eastern women and the way they “should” look. Middle Eastern women were expected (regardless of their religious tendencies or political ideals) to wear a veil, thereby rendering them distinct from their “liberal” Western counterparts. This chapter seeks to prove that the publishing industry, playing off the Western (mis)representation of the *hijab* as a symbol of female oppression, featured women in veils on the covers of these otherwise progressive memoirs as a deliberate marketing technique.

The third and final chapter of this thesis addresses reviews for the memoirs featured on both the publishers' websites and in the print edition of each book relative to reviews written by average American consumers on Amazon.com. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, the relationship between the United States and the Middle East was discussed largely in Manichean terms by the American media.<sup>21</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that many young women voluntarily wear the veil, not only out of respect for their cultures, but also for their own personal beliefs and ideals. Still, the Western media often portrays the veil as a symbol of oppression, and it is this stereotype that is explored in this thesis.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Kellner, “9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 1.1 (2004): 41.

language prompted many critics to describe — whether consciously or unconsciously — the relationship between Iran and the United States in terms of “good” and “evil.” In this chapter, I seek to prove that analyzing reviews is important because critics (both formal and informal) have the power to influence not only whether or not American consumers decide to read a text, but also *how* they read a text.

Throughout this thesis, my analyses and arguments focus primarily on *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis 1*. This layout is due to the fact that not only were these texts bestsellers both in the United States and abroad, but also that each skews the conventional memoir format in an interesting and nuanced way: *Reading Lolita* is structured around novels integral to the Western canon and the ways in which progressive Iranian women respond to these texts, while *Persepolis* employs graphics as a means by which to convey and enhance the author’s story. *Journey From the Land of No* and *Even After All This Time*, both lesser-known texts, help to round out my arguments and provide further support. I believe that these four works, in association with one another, provide an adequate overview of Iranian female-generated memoirs in the American literary marketplace in the five-year period immediately following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

## CHAPTER 1

### FROM MEMOIR TO BESTSELLER: EXPOSING FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LITERARY POPULARITY

Until recently, we had to get sizable grants, plead, or to pull strings to get mainstream publishers to take a cursory look at any manuscript from or about Iran. This is fortunately no longer so, in the case of memoirs. (The old routine still applies for novels, short stories, poetry, and scholarly works.) These days, memoirs are to the publishing industry what reality shows are to television. They have taken over the cultural landscape for bizarre reasons and are making loads of money.<sup>22</sup>

--Nahid Mozaffari, *Women's Studies Quarterly* (2006)

In the years following September 11<sup>th</sup>, the American literary marketplace saw a shift in the attitudes of readers and critics alike towards works by Middle Eastern authors. Following the tragedy, overwhelmingly strong anti-Islamic sentiments were intermingled with a newfound sense of curiosity about Middle Eastern culture and life. In this environment, works written by Iranian writers for non-Iranian audiences found a large readership among Americans, and the memoirs considered in this thesis are no exception.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* was featured on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over 117 weeks.<sup>23</sup> Nafisi won a multitude of literary awards, including the Non-Fiction Book of the Year Award from Book Sense, and an achievement award from the American Immigration Law Foundation.<sup>24</sup> “In 2009, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was named as one of the ‘100 Best Books of the Decade’ by the *Times*.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, both volumes of the graphic memoir *Persepolis* have been featured on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list numerous times, and Satrapi won several comic book awards, including the Prix du Lion in Belgium, the Prix Alph-Art du Meilleur Scénario,

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<sup>22</sup> Mozaffari 516.

<sup>23</sup> “Azar Nafisi, Iranian-American Best Selling Author: Reading Lolita in Tehran and Things I've Been Silent About,” [Steven Barclay Agency](#), Web. 21 October 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

and the Prix France Info.<sup>26</sup> The memoir “was chosen by the Young Adult Library Association as one of its recommended titles for all students,” and was “also named as one of the ‘100 Best Books of the Decade’ by the *Times*.”<sup>27</sup>

The memoirs, *Journey from the Land of No* and *Even After All This Time*, have received relatively less media attention and have sold fewer copies in the United States. Although *Journey From the Land of No* was the winner of the 2004 *Elle* magazine Reader’s Prize for Best Book of the Year in Nonfiction and was featured on the Publishers Weekly list of the Best Books of 2004<sup>28</sup>, the memoir has failed to garner bestseller status. In a recent interview I conducted with the book’s author, Roya Hakakian, she stated, “I don’t think it has been successful enough. I think it’s a pretty decent book, and I think that, given it is such a decent work, I wish it were better known.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, *Even After All This Time* has failed to attract the same media attention as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis*. Though the book was featured on the popular morning news program, *The Today Show*<sup>30</sup>, and was reviewed in several newspapers including the *Washington Post*<sup>31</sup>, the memoir has failed to receive any high-profile awards.

The stark discrepancy in the amount of media attention earned by these two sets of memoirs ultimately begs the question: why, when all four memoirs deal with the similar theme of a young Middle Eastern female reflecting on her time in Iran, did *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis* attract so much more critical attention than *Even After All This Time* and *Journal From the Land of*

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<sup>26</sup> “Marjane Satrapi, Bestselling Artist/Illustrator and Filmmaker, Author of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*,” [Steven Barclay Agency](#), Web.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> “Web Exclusive: The Best Books of 2004,” [Publishers Weekly](#) 251.49, 2004 December 6 Web. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20041206/25559-web-exclusive-the-best-books-of-2004.html>>.

<sup>29</sup> Roya Hakakian, Personal Interview, Skype, 8 January 2013.

<sup>30</sup> “Leaving Iran,” Online Video Clip, [The Today Show](#), 31 March 2005. <<http://www.today.com/video/today/7346097#7346097>>.

<sup>31</sup> Tara Bahrapour, “Orphans of the Revolution,” [The Washington Post](#), Web. 20 March 2005 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A45476-2005Mar17.html>>.

*No?* In this first chapter, I attempt to answer this question by analyzing the memoirs in three capacities: through consideration of the authors' employment of exoticism, the ways in which the memoirs discuss gender, and the texts' literary aesthetics. My analysis of the exotic implications of these memoirs is based upon their conformity to postcolonial theorist Graham Huggan's definition of the term "exotic." In his text, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Huggan argues that "exoticism" allows Western readers to experience the allure of difference from a safe distance.

According to Huggan,

[E]xoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* — one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery... Exoticism, in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity.<sup>32</sup>

With regards to gender, I explore the ways in which these memoirs display images of women that would likely appeal to Western feminists. I also analyze the literary aesthetics of each memoir, which, in this thesis, refers to the quality of the writing and fundamental literary style that the author employs throughout her memoir.

### **I. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: The Contentious Bestseller***

Throughout Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Iran is frequently portrayed as an exotic locale that is oppressive and patriarchal. Perhaps the most significant way in which Nafisi achieves this portrayal is by comparing her own life and the lives of the young women in her secret reading group to those of female characters in a variety of well-known literary works, including *Lolita*, *Daisy Miller*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *A Thousand and One Nights* (among others). Nafisi and her students live under difficult conditions, utilizing their reading as a medium for reflection upon their own lives. This is especially true of their reading of *A Thousand and One Nights*, a work compiled in eighteenth century Egypt from a variety of Middle Eastern tales and folklore. The well-

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<sup>32</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001):13.

known and highly-acclaimed collection has, in fact, been accused of “creat[ing] misconceptions and reinforc[ing] imagined barriers between West and East.”<sup>33</sup> Within the context of Nafisi’s work, *A Thousand and One Nights* is the only text the author analyzes that speaks to Arabic, Persian, Egyptian, or Mesopotamian literature.<sup>34</sup> Nafisi refers to the text, stating,

The first work we discussed was *A Thousand and One Nights*, the familiar tale of the cuckolded king who slew successive virgin wives as revenge for his queen’s betrayal, and whose murderous hand was finally stayed by the entrancing storyteller Scheherazade. I formulated certain general questions for them to consider, the most central of which was how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women... Both types of women — the queen and the virgins — tacitly accept the king’s public authority by acting within the confines of his domain and by accepting its arbitrary laws. Scheherazade breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different terms of engagement. She fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection. This gives her the courage to risk her life and sets her apart from the other characters in the tale.<sup>35</sup>

In this passage, Nafisi describes the virgins who are victims of the king’s oppressive regime. In contrast, she describes Scheherazade, subtly putting her forth as a model for how the women in her reading group should operate in order to survive under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, or, as Nafisi calls him, “A stern ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher-king, [who] had come to rule our land.”<sup>36</sup> By comparing the Ayatollah to the tyrannical fictional Persian King of Kings from the *A Thousand and One Nights*, Nafisi suggests that post-revolutionary Iran is comparable to medieval Persia, perpetuating an orientalized view of the country as an unwaveringly oppressive and, indeed, exotic land.

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<sup>33</sup> “Agenda: *The Thousand and One Nights*,” *Artis*, 2009  
<[http://www.artiscontemporary.org/agenda\\_detail.php?id=373](http://www.artiscontemporary.org/agenda_detail.php?id=373)>.

<sup>34</sup> Nafisi notes that, in her secret reading group, “[We] read Persian classical literature, such as the tales of our own lady of fiction, Scheherazade, from *A Thousand and One Nights*...” (6), but does not cite other Persian texts. Nafisi does discuss Persian writers when she describes joining a reading group focused upon Middle Eastern literature. She states, “Like a group of conspirators, we would gather around the dining room table and read poetry and prose from Rumi, Hafez, Sa’adi, Khayyam, Nezami, Ferdowsi, Attar, Beyhagi” (172). Still, Nafisi spends no more than one page describing this reading group.

<sup>35</sup> Nafisi 19.

<sup>36</sup> Nafisi 28.

Although Nafisi's analysis of *A Thousand and One Nights* reinforces negative stereotypes about Iran, her memoir in its entirety should not be read as a strategic attempt to demonize Iran for Western audiences. Several scholars have misread this memoir and have critiqued its content in harsh, politically reductive terms.<sup>37</sup> These readings have incited controversy, ultimately increasing the public's interest in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Inflammatory reviews of the memoir have been discussed in such popular news outlets as the *New York Times*, *Slate Magazine*, the *Guardian*, and the *Boston Globe*.<sup>38</sup> A journalist at the *Boston Globe*, aware of the memoir's massive popularity with book clubs across the country, cleverly titled his review, "Book Clubbed." The Western media's interest in this controversy has helped to elevate Nafisi to the status of literary celebrity (albeit a highly contentious one). Among Nafisi's most ardent critics is Hamid Dabashi, a professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. In his text *Brown Skin, White Masks*,<sup>39</sup> Dabashi argues that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reinforces the logic that "... to fight against Islamic terrorism is to save Muslim women from their own men — 'white men saving brown women from brown men' ..." <sup>40</sup> and asserts that Nafisi's memoir is an exercise in exploiting literature from the West in order to endorse United States imperialism. He states, "...[Nafisi] is cropping and framing this picture [of Iran], shrinking it to a size that is useful for recycling English literature in sustaining a

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<sup>37</sup> For example, Fatemeh Keshavarz provides a harsh critique of the memoir in her text, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> I have in mind the essay, "Beyond the Burka" by Lorraine Adams, which was featured in *The New York Times* on January 6, 2008 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/books/review/Adams-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/books/review/Adams-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)>; the article, "Critical Distance," written by Jane Miller for *The Guardian* on April 3, 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/apr/04/memories-azar-nafisi>>; and Christopher Shea's October 29, 2006 article, "Book Clubbed" for *The Boston Globe* <[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/10/29/book\\_clubbed/?page=ful](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/10/29/book_clubbed/?page=ful)>

<sup>39</sup> The title, *Brown Skin, White Masks* refers to the analysis *Black Skin, White Masks* by postcolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon. In this psychoanalytical work, Fanon explores black consciousness in a white world.

<sup>40</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011): 69.

predatory empire... CliffsNotes on English-language literature at the service of Paul Wolfowitz — that is *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in a nutshell.”<sup>41</sup>

Curiously, in his analysis, Dabashi does not mention the moments in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in which Nafisi expresses concern over whether she is presenting the West in too positive a light to her students. Nafisi worries that she may be manipulating her students with her discussions of the United States and Western literature. She expresses this concern most directly in reference to one of her students, a young girl named Yassi. Nafisi fears that she and Yassi’s uncle are presenting the United States as a fantasy for the girl:

Yassi was elated whenever [her uncle] came for visits, or on the rare occasions he wrote home or called from the States and asked specifically to talk to her. He was the only one who was allowed to put ideas into Yassi’s head without any reproach. And he did put ideas into her head. First, he had encouraged her to continue her musical practices; then he had said, Why not go to the university in Tehran? Now he had advised her to continue her studies in America. Everything he told Yassi about life in America — events that seemed routine to him — gained a magical glow in her greedy eyes. She regularly checked these stories with me, and I always had something of my own to add. I felt as if her uncle and I were co-conspirators, leading young Yassi astray. And I worried: what if we were encouraging her into a life that was essentially not good for her?<sup>42</sup>

In this passage, Nafisi’s concern over her apparent pro-Western stance effectively preempts the critic’s concerns that she directly promotes the West as a superior culture and way of life. Dabashi’s critique of the memoir appears to be driven, perhaps unconsciously, by anxieties about the propagation of stereotypes about Iran in the United States, rather than by the narrative itself.

Though some skeptical readers may argue that Nafisi’s expression of concern may be a way of indicating that she is aware of how readers may perceive her infatuation with Western literature, this passage is nonetheless important. By voicing her concerns about Yassi moving to the United States, Nafisi suggests that, though her students have been forced to live without the freedoms of speech and dress for years, she does not believe that moving to America would necessarily improve

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<sup>41</sup> Brown Skin, White Masks 77.

<sup>42</sup> Nafisi 270.

the quality of their lives. After all, moving to the United States would entail leaving their homelands (and, more often than not, as illustrated in these memoirs, leaving their families), for a life of ostracism in America. Passages expressing these types of sentiments intermittently present themselves throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, ultimately weakening the argument that this memoir unequivocally advocates that Iranian women need to be rescued by the West, and, more specifically, by the United States.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the “exotic” implications of Nafisi’s “negative” representation of Iran, the controversy may also have gender-based effects, increasing its appeal among Western liberal feminists. In the article, “Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns,” Hilary E. Davis, professor of Philosophy at York University, states: “Western liberal feminist sentiments...emphasize individual autonomy, rights and freedom rather than collective action...”<sup>44</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran* appeals to these sentiments by illustrating moments of individual acts of rebellion. Davis cites as examples not only Nafisi’s own refusal to wear the veil while teaching, but also the story of her friend, Laleh, a woman who is chased by university guards after refusing to cover her hair. Still, there are acts of rebellion other than refusing to wear the veil that are evident in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, including the very act of meeting to discuss Western literature, as well as Nafisi’s decision to divorce her first husband whom she married at 18.

Although Nafisi’s emphasis on individual autonomy for women contributed to the book’s popularity among liberal Western feminists, the memoir overlooks the rich history of women’s

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<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, at one point in the memoir, Nafisi has her students read the novel *The Bellarosa Connection* believing that many of her students regard the Islamic Republic and the United States as opposing extremes. According to Nafisi, her students view the Republic as a place of oppressiveness and the United States as the land of democracy. Nafisi asserts that this novel allows them to see past this façade.

Nafisi 312.

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Burwell, Hilary E. Davis, Lisa K. Taylor, “Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (2008): 71.

activism in Iran.<sup>45</sup> One of the more noteworthy (and, in the context of Nafisi's fascination with literature, significant) omissions is the author's failure to introduce her Western readers to Iranian publications distributed by women for women. One such publication, *Zanan*, a magazine founded in 1992, criticized the Khatami government reforms while also discussing social and political topics most pertinent to Iranian women (notably, domestic abuse and the obscuration of women in Iranian society).<sup>46</sup> Instead of depicting a broader (albeit, certainly still quite limited) Iranian female rebellion, Nafisi focuses on "the independent heroine," a celebrated figure amongst Western feminists.<sup>47</sup> This decision alone represents a relatively progressive move within the context of Iranian literature.

By characterizing women as "independent heroines," Nafisi does not limit her book's appeal to a readership comprised solely of Western feminist critics; she also speaks to the millions of women in book clubs across America. According to literary journalist Amy DePaul, in her article, "Re-Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*," the women in the memoir engage in a "free space"; they may remove their veils and discuss topics such as Western literature, their status as women in Islamic society, and their relationships with the men in their lives.<sup>48</sup> DePaul also notes that the release of Nafisi's "memoir coincided with an explosion of largely female book clubs and reading groups starting in the 1990s."<sup>49</sup> Oprah's Book Club, which was launched in 1996, played an integral role in sparking interest in reading groups among American women.<sup>50</sup> In Joanne Kaufman's article for the *New York Times*, "Publishers Seek to Mine Book Circles," she describes how, in an attempt to maximize the likelihood that a book will be profitable, publishers may attempt to court and cater to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Amy DePaul, "Re-Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*," *The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* 33.2 (2008): 73.

<sup>49</sup> DePaul 73.

<sup>50</sup> Yung-Hsing Wu, "The Romance of Reading Like Oprah," *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah's Book Club* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008): 75.

book clubs.<sup>51</sup> This article is especially pertinent to this analysis, in that it discusses Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, which, like *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, is a Middle Eastern text that has garnered much popularity among book clubs in the United States. The idea of publishers catering to book clubs certainly applies to Random House, the publisher of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*; indeed, the book is featured on the publisher's website under the heading "The perfect books for your book club."<sup>52</sup> A "Q&A" session with Nafisi and the Random House Reader's Circle is included on the website, as well as a Reader's Guide featuring discussion questions on such topics as the veil and women's rights. By marketing the memoir in this manner, Random House's promotion of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* appeals not only to book clubs, but also to readers whose views of the Middle East have been shaped by Western media.

Just as the memoir achieved literary success by way of discussions of exoticism and shifting gender roles, so too may the success of Nafisi's book be attributed to its literary aesthetics. In her text, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock notes that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* serves as an example of "high pop."<sup>53</sup> In *High-Pop: Making Culture Into Popular Entertainment*, Jim Collins defines "high-pop" as "the popularization of good taste" and the "merger" between high art and popular culture.<sup>54</sup> Collins argues that there has been a fusion between these previously distinct cultural spheres, asserting that the renegotiation of the relationship between the two has led to widely successful film adaptations of novels like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>55</sup> Nafisi's memoir

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<sup>51</sup> Joanne Kaufman, "Publishers Seek to Mine Book Circles," The New York Times 19 November 2007, Web. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/19/business/media/19bookclubs.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/19/business/media/19bookclubs.html?_r=0)>.

<sup>52</sup> "Random House Reader's Circle: Reading Lolita in Tehran," Random House, Inc. Web. 21 January 2013  
<[http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/rc/library/results.pperl?title\\_subtitle\\_auth\\_isbn=%22reading+lolita+in+tehran%22&submit.x=-1082&submit.y=-121&submit=submit](http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/rc/library/results.pperl?title_subtitle_auth_isbn=%22reading+lolita+in+tehran%22&submit.x=-1082&submit.y=-121&submit=submit)>.

<sup>53</sup> Gillian Whitlock, Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2007): 169.

<sup>54</sup> Jim Collins, "High-Pop: An Introduction," High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002): 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Collins 157.

became a “blockbuster” in the literary world largely because it appealed to readers interested in reading an “eye-opening” personal narrative about Middle Eastern women, as well as those sophisticated readers who were intrigued by the idea of reading classic Western literature through a new (and, certainly, exotic) lens. The memoir’s attainment of “blockbuster” status may also be attributed, in large part, to Nafisi’s reference to *Lolita* in her title. The titular character of *Lolita*, the brilliant and controversial 1955 work by Vladimir Nabokov, would almost certainly resonate with Western audiences, many of whom read the novel as part of a high school/college literary curriculum. By directly invoking *Lolita* in her title, Nafisi not only creates an immediate distinction between the sexually precocious adolescent girl of Nabokov’s fiction and the young girls who populate her reading group, but she also ensures that Western readers, familiar with *Lolita* and the dangerous nature of sexuality described in the novel, would be more inclined to buy her memoir.

As the memoir progresses, Nafisi’s descriptions of *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Pride and Prejudice* (among others) teem with flowery and poetic language. Her memoir is structured around these texts, as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is divided into four sections: “Lolita,” “Gatsby,” “James,” and “Austen.” By naming the sections after well-known Western characters or authors (it is prudent to note that the main Middle Eastern heroine described in the memoir, Scheherazade, is conspicuously absent from the section headings), Nafisi effectively relegates the women in her own reading group to the periphery of the discussion. Indeed, so peripheral are these characters that Nafisi’s readers may often find themselves forgetting the names and personalities of the women in her reading group. Although Nafisi has achieved enormous success by writing in this framework, readers on social media blogs sometimes state that they find Nafisi’s academic focus unappealing. For example, one social media blogger remarked, “It really wasn’t at all what I was expecting. It felt very academic,” while another noted, “I might prefer a more personal narrative that

will help me connect to the story more deeply.”<sup>56</sup> By structuring her text around other literary works, Nafisi’s book functions simultaneously as a memoir and as a work of literary criticism, defying many Western consumers’ expectations as to what constitutes a “typical” memoir. With *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi creates an unexpectedly literary — and tremendously *successful* — space for herself in the memoir genre. This success serves as a testament to the fact that sophisticated texts that invite the public to engage their literary skills can become “must-read” sensations.

In this section, we have explored several reasons for the massive success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The controversy surrounding the memoir and its supposedly propagandistic attack on Islam was relentlessly discussed in the Western media. This controversy spurred curiosity and almost certainly enticed many Americans to buy and read the memoir. Though much has been made of the memoir’s supposedly reductive and negative stance towards Iran (a critique this chapter has sought to complicate by showing the ways in which Nafisi does not succumb to pro-Western bias), this controversy is certainly not the sole reason for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*’s popularity. Ultimately, the memoir’s (sometimes) exotic depictions of Iran, its appeal to Western feminists and book club culture, and perhaps, above all, the quality of Nafisi’s prose have each contributed to the book’s enduring success and popularity within the American literary marketplace.

## **II. *Persepolis*: A Graphic Twist on the Conventional Memoir Format**

Just as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* may be examined in the context of exoticism, gender, and literary aesthetics, so too may Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir, *Persepolis*. *Persepolis* may first be considered in terms of exoticism. Satrapi makes the graphic memoir, set in Tehran, particularly appealing to Western readers; though the story takes place in an exotic locale, there are familiar

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<sup>56</sup> Leah Mosher, “[Reading Lolita in Tehran](http://booksspeakvolumes.com/2012/11/28/reading-lolita-in-tehran-by-azar-nafisi/) by Azar Nafisi,” *Books Speak Volumes*, Posted on 28 November 2012 <<http://booksspeakvolumes.com/2012/11/28/reading-lolita-in-tehran-by-azar-nafisi/>>.

Western references that permeate the text, rendering the story increasingly accessible to American readers. In the frames below, Marji is visibly excited by the gifts that her parents have brought her from their vacation to Turkey. Though these gifts come from another Middle Eastern nation, they represent Western goods that have been banned by the Ayatollahs in Iran. The scene, therefore, underscores the designation of Iran as “exotic,” not only in relation to America, but also to other, more progressive Middle Eastern nations. Marji exclaims, “I put my posters up in my room. I put my 1983 Nikes on... and my denim jacket with the Michael Jackson button, and of course, my headscarf.”



**Figure 3: Marji's Adolescence**

*Photo Credits: Marjane Satrapi, The Complete Persepolis (New York: Random House, 2007): 131.*

This scene aligns rather seamlessly with Graham Huggan's postcolonial exotic discourse. Huggan argues that this discourse relies on “the spectacle of cultural difference,”<sup>57</sup> and may be regarded as “a mechanism of cultural translation for the English-speaking mainstream...”<sup>58</sup> In these

<sup>57</sup> Huggan 31.

<sup>58</sup> Huggan 32.

frames, Satrapi places “cultural difference” on display not only through the use of images, but also through her text. Marji’s actions (“head banging” to Iran Maiden, impersonating the voluptuous Kim Wilde, lacing up her sneakers, and donning a denim jacket) feel familiar to American readers — up to a point. The image of Marji putting on a headscarf is starkly unfamiliar to most Americans, and the phrase “of course,” stops American readers in their tracks, reminding them that this is a story about a girl coming-of-age in a locale that is much different from the social and political environment of their own upbringing.

Through the intermingling of an Iranian childhood and Western consumer culture in these frames, Satrapi provides a common ground between her own “exotic” experiences and the experiences of her readers. Western readers of Satrapi’s generation see elements in these frames that were likely part of their own adolescence. The combination of familiarity and foreignness may be regarded as a fundamental reason why this text has achieved such popularity among American readers. Not only does Marji challenge dominant systems of representation within the Islamic Republic by rebelling against the strict dress code, she also conforms to “exoticist aesthetics”<sup>59</sup> because her foreignness is domesticated by the presence of Western artifacts. For American readers, Marji is foreign in a *familiar* way.

In addition to the concept of exoticism, the popularity of *Persepolis* may also be attributed to the gender-based discussions presented within the memoir. In this context, her mother represents a complicated figure for American audiences: though her Islamic background and residence in Tehran would otherwise make her a decidedly “exotic” character, Marji’s mother embodies many of the same personality traits and virtues that Satrapi’s readers would identify in themselves. Satrapi introduces her mother by describing the protests against the veil that occurred following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The introduction of Marji’s mother to the text in this context is significant. Just

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

as Nafisi boldly refuses to wear the veil while teaching at the University of Tehran in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marji's mother courageously protests against the veil. Once again the familiar figure of the "independent heroine" is presented to Western readers. Western feminists may feel a kinship with



**Figure 4: The Introduction of Marji's Mother**  
*Photo Credits: Marjane Satrapi, The Complete Persepolis 5.*

Marji's mother because she dresses in Western fashions, speaks her mind, and supports women's rights. In doing so, she may implicitly be deemed more Western than the "average" Iranian woman.

In addition to these political rebellions, Marji's mother

also exhibits her power in the private sphere.

Within the home, Marji's father rarely reprimands her; instead, her mother assumes the role of the disciplinary figure. In the

frame below, Marji's mother scolds her daughter for skipping class, raising her right arm as a way to physically assert her strength. Within the image, the full form of Marji's

mother is presented, encompassing two-thirds of the frame. Marji, in contrast, is relegated to the bottom left corner of the frame, with only half of her body shown. In the context of gender roles, the illustration emphasizes the power that Marji's mother has over her daughter and, more generally, within her family. The fact that her mother's figure is drawn in a solid black, amorphous manner is also intriguing. While the solid black figure may draw comparisons to Islamic women hidden from view in thick black chadors, Marji's mother is shown with a rather masculine figure. This portrayal may subtly suggest her shared role (with her husband) as head of the nuclear family



**Figure 5: The Formidable Figure of Marji's Mother**  
*Photo Credits: Marjane Satrapi, The Complete Persepolis 113.*

unit – a role unknown to many Middle Eastern women, especially at the time of the Revolution. Because one cannot tell the gender of the parent figure, it strips away the notion of a mother and father and creates an amorphous parent. This is especially problematic in Middle Eastern literature and traditional Middle Eastern culture where the father is and has always been the head of the nuclear family.

Figure 6

further supports the idea of the shared parental role in the Satrapi household. In it, Marji's parents are depicted as equals. Both wear Western clothing and are seated together as a united front, with no clear-cut division of power. This equal partnership would likely be appealing to Western feminists.



With regards to literary aesthetics, *Persepolis*

offers perhaps the most intriguing basis for analysis among the texts considered in this thesis.

Throughout the memoir, graphics are just as significant as words with regards to the conveyance of the story

**Figure 6: Marji's Parents**  
Photo Credits: *Marjane Satrapi, The Complete Persepolis 32.*

and understanding of the characters. Though the graphic memoir represents a unique entity in the context of this thesis, Satrapi was not a pioneer of the literary medium. On July 11, 2004, the *New York Times* published an article discussing the newfound mass appeal of graphic novels and graphic memoirs. In it, author Charles McGrath asserted that graphic novels are “the new literary form,” and stated that “...they are beginning to be taken seriously by the critical establishment.”<sup>60</sup> Even within this new subset of the memoir genre, Satrapi's work is unlike most other graphic novels. Whereas many graphic novelists employ elaborate drawings in vivid color, Satrapi's characters are drawn one-

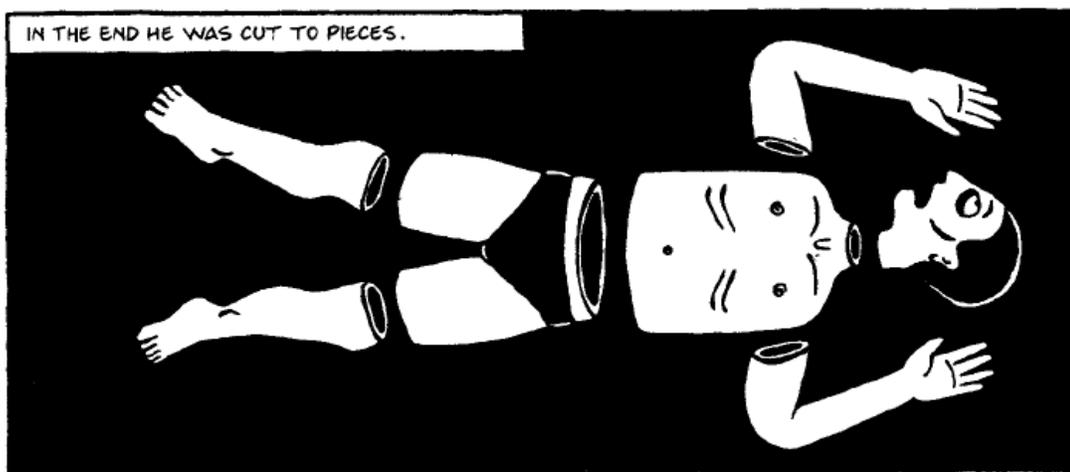
<sup>60</sup> Charles McGrath, “Not Funnies,” *The New York Times* 11 July 2004  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/11/magazine/not-funnies.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>.

dimensionally in black and white. These simple images (figures 7-9) provide a stark counterpoint to the complex themes of “torture, war, [and] suicide”<sup>61</sup> that encompass the text.



**Figure 7: Suicide**

*Photo Credits: Marjane Satrapi, The Complete Persepolis 273.*



**Figure 8: Brutality**

*Photo Credits: Marjane Satrapi, The Complete Persepolis 52.*

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<sup>61</sup> Malek 372.



Figure 9: War

Photo Credits: Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* 116.

Amy Malek, in her article, “Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* Series,” notes that the memoir’s stark and simplistic design draws readers in, allowing them to feel empathy for Marji and her family without feeling overwhelmed by overly graphic or violent images.<sup>62</sup> Satrapi’s accessible, yet tremendously witty writing also makes the memoir appealing to a wide audience. Not only do the many moments of humor and sarcasm provide comedic relief for readers, but they also provide a humanizing image of Iranians that one does not typically see in the Western mainstream media.

*Persepolis* remains one of the most popular graphic memoirs in the American literary marketplace. On January 25, 2013, George Gene Gustines reported that *Persepolis* had achieved the top ranking position on the *New York Times*.<sup>63</sup> *Persepolis*’ popularity continues to grow, as evidenced by the fact this it is used as an educational tool in university-level Women’s Studies and History courses across the United States.<sup>64</sup> Hopefully, the popularity of Satrapi’s memoir will help to promote a more nuanced and less orientaling perception of Iran in the United States.

### III. The Lesser-Known Memoirs: *Journey from the Land of No* and *Even After All This Time*

Hakakian’s memoir, *Journey from the Land of No*, reads like a companion to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi and Hakakian frequently reference other literary works as a means by which to understand revolutionary Iran, and each engages with literature in nuanced and compelling ways. Nafisi, as previously discussed, focuses on Western literature in her memoir. In contrast, Hakakian focuses instead on the Islamic work *The Little Black Fish* by radical Iranian author, Samad Behrangi.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> George Gene Gustines, “Graphic Books Best Sellers: ‘Persepolis’ Tops the Paperback List,” The New York Times 25 January 2013 <<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/graphic-books-best-sellers-persepolis-tops-the-paperback-list/>>.

<sup>64</sup> Vanessa E. Jones, “A Life in Graphic Detail: Iranian Exile’s Memoirs Draw Readers into Her Experience,” The Boston Globe 4 October 2004 <[http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2004/10/04/a\\_life\\_in\\_graphic\\_detail/](http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2004/10/04/a_life_in_graphic_detail/)>.

The well-known Persian children's book, which was banned by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime, employs a political allegory in order to criticize the contemporary political, economic, and social structure of Iran. Unlike the widely read texts Nafisi references in her memoir, *The Little Black Fish* has not been a well-known book in the post-9/11 American literary marketplace. Many Iranian-Americans are either not familiar with the book or do not see its significance in contemporary times. In her epilogue, Hakakian notes that she recently asked a shopkeeper at an Iranian bookstore in Los Angeles if he had a copy of *The Little Black Fish*. She writes,

Of the two men managing the store, the younger did not know the book, and the older, startled by my question, said admonishingly, 'The Little Black Fish? Missus, do you not know the era of Samad Behrangi is long over and that case is altogether obsolete nowadays? Go on, now! Go get on with your life.'<sup>65</sup>

Although Hakakian's description is intended to display how *The Little Black Fish* has been rendered obsolete in both historical and geographical terms, this incident may serve as a rationale for the outmoded nature of *her* memoir. By constructing her narrative around *The Little Black Fish*, Hakakian does not present her American readers — both those with hybrid Iranian-American identities (like the author herself) and those of non-Middle Eastern ancestry — with an urgent reason to read her memoir. In contrast, the notion of reading *Lolita* in Tehran is both unexpected and provocative, enticing the American reader to buy Nafisi's memoir. Although Hakakian presents herself as a strong and independent girl who excels in school, and especially, in her writing classes (details that would be appealing to Western feminists), the book's less provocative nature may be a fundamental reason why this text was not as popular.

Enlightening connections may also be made between Latifi's memoir, *Even After All This Time* and Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Latifi's memoir was published two years after the bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In a review for the memoir published in Kirkus Reviews, the critic compares *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to *Even After All This Time*, stating, "A depiction of life

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<sup>65</sup> Hakakian 233.

after the Iranian Revolution will invite inevitable — and unfavorable — comparison with Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.<sup>66</sup> The critic goes on to write:

Despite the thrilling backdrop, though — the tumultuous Iranian politics, international education, high-pitched emotions — the story is colorless and plodding. Experiences that might have been entrancing in the hands of another writer tend to the prosaic: 'Day-to-day life in Iran was becoming impossible'; 'Before long, I began to feel more optimistic about the future'; 'I was . . . devastated by the break-up.'<sup>67</sup>

The book itself was completed in a very short time frame. In a recent interview I conducted with Latifi, who now works as an intellectual property lawyer, the author stated, "HarperCollins had given me two years to finish the book, and it took me nine months."<sup>68</sup> Though, as the critic for Kirkus notes, the prose may be criticized as tedious, the text recounts a story of a remarkably strong mother whose husband is executed during the Islamic Revolution. Once again, this plotline would appeal to the Western feminist's desire for stories of women's perseverance in the Middle East. This story, however, is told from Latifi's perspective, not that of her mother. Moreover, one element crucial (as has been illustrated) to a text's popularity is missing from this memoir: exotic appeal. Unlike the other three memoirs under consideration in this thesis, much of *Even After All This Time* takes place in Europe and in the United States. By presenting a world in which Western readers are comfortable and familiar, Latifi largely fails to provide readers with insight into an unknown, exotic world.

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<sup>66</sup> "Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran," *Kirkus Reviews*, 15 January 2005, Web. 10 March 2013 <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/afschineh-latifi/even-after-all-this-time/>>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> In her interview with me, Latifi stated that she had never planned to write a memoir about her life until Judith Regan, a former publisher for HarperCollins approached her about writing her life story. Latifi has no plans to publishing a sequel to her memoir. "I am a lawyer. I am not an author. It is not my life. I am not in the bookselling business... My motives were not fame or money oriented. I thought, the universe is presenting an opportunity to me to tell [my family's] story and an opportunity for me to feel from these events that happened in my life," Latifi stated.

#### IV. Conclusions

Reader-response criticism can provide insight into the discrepancies between the popularity of these four memoirs. German theorist Hans Robert Jauss argues that readers approach a text with “a horizon of expectation[s]”<sup>69</sup> and these expectations are formed by “a reader’s knowledge and assumptions about the text and literature in general.”<sup>70</sup> The post-9/11 American public, influenced by the Western media, expects stories from Iran to present the Republic as backward and oppressive to women. The so-called “typical” American reading experience is oftentimes influenced by these expectations, even if the text itself conveys a very different message about Iran and Iranian women. Hamid Dabashi serves as a pronounced example of a reader’s “horizons of expectation[s]” corrupting his/her reading experience. Dabashi formed harsh opinions about Nafisi’s memoir and, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, these critiques did not correlate to the narrative itself. This chapter’s exploration of three facets of popularity (exoticism, gender, and literary aesthetics) serves to show that American readers approach memoirs with previously established desires and expectations. When these desires and expectations are found within or validated by the memoir, it is more likely to rise in popularity in the American literary marketplace.

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<sup>69</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982): xii. Note, Mohja Kahf describes the idea of a “horizon of expectation[s]” in her article, “Packaging ‘Huda’: Sha’rawi’s Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment.” This article is featured in the book Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995): 257.

## CHAPTER 2

### EXOTICISM ON DISPLAY

There exists a multitude of different ways to approach the concept of literary popularity. Chapter One explored the ways in which each author's personal narrative appealed to American readers' desires and expectations with regards to exoticism, gender divisions, and literary aesthetics. Although the author's written word is crucial to an analysis of literary popularity, we must also consider these memoirs in relation to their paratextual elements. As Gillian Whitlock notes in *Soft Weapons*, book covers, titles, and epigraphs "are consumed in the most casual acquaintance with the book — the glance, the flick through."<sup>71</sup> Since paratexts have the power to influence the general reading public, it is important to understand the messages they communicate. This chapter considers a particular type of paratext: the front cover.

According to Gerard Genette in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987), the printed cover is a rather new phenomenon.<sup>72</sup> He notes, "In the classical period, books appeared inside a leather binding that was mute except for a short version of the title and sometimes, on the spine, the author's name." Genette elaborates, "At that time the title page was the main site of the publisher's paratext, but once the possibilities of the cover were discovered, they seem to have been exploited very rapidly."<sup>73</sup> Publishers and authors began to realize the importance of the style and design of book covers as a means to entice and/or influence their prospective readers in nineteenth century Europe.<sup>74</sup> Since that time, the appearance of book covers has rapidly evolved, encompassing everything from stark one-word titles to images depicting graphic violence or sexual exploitation. So effectual have book covers become as a means by which to persuade (or, indeed, dissuade) readers

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<sup>71</sup> Whitlock 57.

<sup>72</sup> Genette 23.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

that the phrase “don’t judge a book by its cover” has become ingrained within our collective literary mentality.<sup>75</sup>

The front covers of each of the memoirs under consideration in this thesis feature similar illustrations or photographs of veiled women. In the same line of thought as Chapter One’s discussion of exoticism, the appearance of women in *hijabs* conveys a certain sense of “otherness,” foreign to American readers. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, many Americans have perceived the image of a veiled, robed, and (perhaps by extension in the Western mindset) wholly oppressed woman as synonymous with Iran.<sup>76</sup> Iranians are aware of this prevailing perception. In a 2007 interview with NBC’s Chief Foreign Correspondent, Richard Engel, Leila Hoda, a 27-year-old woman from Tehran, argued that the West must “look beyond the veil.” Hoda stated, “In the West, people have this stereotypical vision of women in Tehran, that they’re always in their houses... They think you cover your faces and you don’t come out. People actually ask me, ‘Can you drive in Tehran?’ Of course, you have women taxi drivers in Tehran!”<sup>77</sup> In spite of the pleas of individuals like Hoda, the veiled women featured on the covers of these memoirs emphasize the continued inability of Western publishers (and, consequently, Western readers) to perceive Middle Eastern women as anything but shrouded, dejected figures.

In this chapter, we will analyze the front cover as a “public space,”<sup>78</sup> exploring each cover’s design in terms of both stereotyping and Orientalism. These covers function as intriguing cultural artifacts because they are inextricably linked to broader narratives about the relationship between the United States and Iran, specifically the American perception that Iranian culture is misogynistic and

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<sup>75</sup> According to Martin H. Manser in The Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs, the first variant of “don’t judge a book by its cover” — you can’t judge a book by its binding — was recorded in the periodical American Speech in 1929. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007): 61-62.

<sup>76</sup> “Today in Iran: Understanding Iranian Women,” Online Video Clip, The Today Show, 13 September 2007 <[http://www.today.com/id/20757597/site/todayshow/ns/today-today\\_in\\_iran/t/beyond-veil-lives-women-iran/#.UP3t96FxdU5](http://www.today.com/id/20757597/site/todayshow/ns/today-today_in_iran/t/beyond-veil-lives-women-iran/#.UP3t96FxdU5)>.

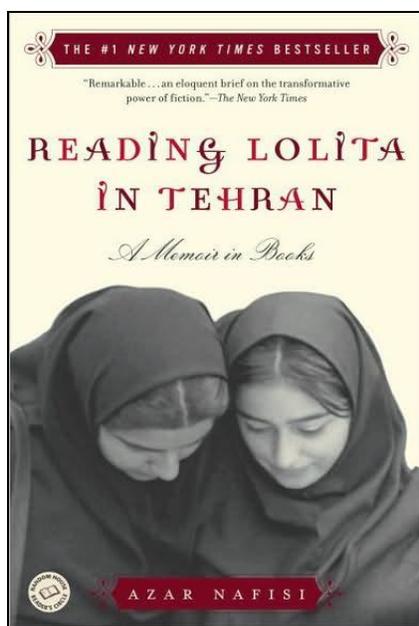
<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Whitlock 58.

oppressive to women. These covers also lead to interesting conclusions about the ethics surrounding the capitalist aims of the publishing industry. Ultimately, this chapter sets forth to consider why these memoirs, written by self-sufficient and liberal women, are visually depicted by exoticized women and stereotyped imagery.

### **I. Reading the Cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran***

Though at first glance, the cover of the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (shown below) may appear to be an innocent depiction of women, it has deeper implications. The cover art features two veiled women huddled together, looking over an object (presumably, given the focus of the memoir in question, a book) that is out of view. The representation of the progressive women depicted in the memoir with girls wearing traditional *hijabs* may be interpreted in two ways: first, the veils, as discussed in Chapter One, may serve to underscore the notion of “otherness” and female oppression in the Middle East. Secondly, the two veiled girls, taken in conjunction with the titular reference to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, may be considered in a more sexualized, erotic context. This eroticism stems from the readers’ presumed prior awareness of Nabokov’s text: *Lolita* explores the illicit relationship between middle-aged literature professor, Humbert Humbert, and Dolores Haze, his sexually precocious 12-year-old step-daughter. The juxtaposition of the *Lolita* reference — with all of the sexually charged imagery and themes conjured by the name — with the two conservative appearing women seems counterintuitive. This section carefully analyzes the cover, specifically the photo of these two women, and its inevitable insinuations.



**Figure 10: The Front Cover of Reading Lolita in Tehran**

**Photo Credits: Design by Allison Saltzman, Reading Lolita in Tehran (New York: Random House, 2003).**

In “Native informers and the making of the American Empire,” an article for the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Hamid Dabashi notes that the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* may be placed in a long history of Orientalist paintings. The association of Middle Eastern women with eroticism is not a new concept. Since the beginning of the colonization of the East, Europeans have portrayed Middle Eastern women as alluring figures.<sup>79</sup> Colonial European artists often provided romanticized depictions of Middle Eastern women within a harem. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “harem” as, “The part of a Muslim dwelling-house appropriated to the women, constructed so as to secure the utmost seclusion and privacy”<sup>80</sup>; in spite of this, in Orientalist paintings of the colonial era, the harem was presented as a sphere of forbidden pleasure.<sup>81</sup> These portraits encouraged stereotypes about Middle Eastern women to develop. French Neoclassical painter, Jean Auguste

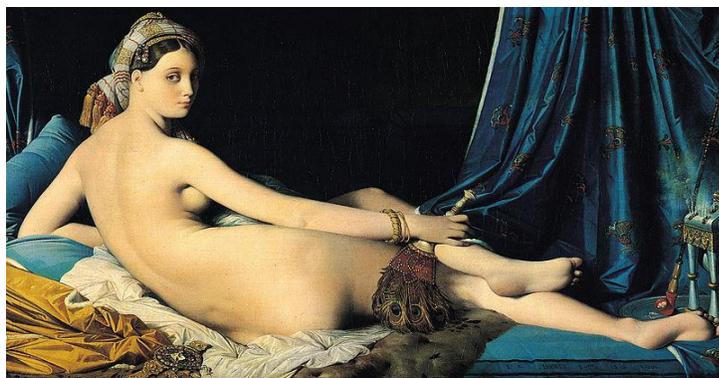
<sup>79</sup> In Malek Alloula’s essay, *The Colonial Harem* (1986), he provides a fascinating analysis of French colonial photographic postcards of Algerian women from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, arguing that they are exploitive representations of the female Other within a harem.

<sup>80</sup> “Harem,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Web. 13 February 2013

<<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/84220?redirectedFrom=harem>>.

<sup>81</sup> Alloula 3.

Dominique Ingres' painting, *La Grande Odalisque* (1814)<sup>82</sup>, and English portrait painter William Clarke Wontner's painting, *Safie, One of the Three Ladies of Baghdad* (1900)<sup>83</sup>, are famous examples of paintings of this nature:



**Figure 11: La Grande Odalisque, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1814)**

*Photo Credits: the Louvre, Paris*

**Figure 12: Safie, One of the Three Ladies of Baghdad, William Clarke Wontner (1900)**

*Photo Credits: Present Location Unknown*

In each of these paintings, Middle Eastern women are portrayed as sensual, eroticized beings. Ingres' painting is clearly the more overtly sexual of the two, not only because the model's nude body is on display, but also because she appears to be looking directly at the photographer, indicating that she is aware of the photographer's gaze and, perhaps, is willing to offer herself up to erotic pleasures. In Wontner's painting, the effect is not nearly as blatant, yet there is a subtle depiction of eroticism. The woman in the painting is removing her veil, exposing her face, neck, and flowing brown hair; the exposure of her hair is particularly significant, as hair is historically and, certainly,

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<sup>82</sup> There is critical dispute surrounding whether the woman is from North Africa or the Middle East, as the painting has elements suggestive of both.

<sup>83</sup> Dabashi addresses the same painting in his critique of the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in his article "Native Informers and the Making of the American empire."

culturally representative of femininity and sexuality.<sup>84</sup> The viewer feels privy to a private moment, not intended to be witnessed by strangers' eyes, in which the Middle Eastern woman begins to subtly expose herself, likely within her own home. Although to a lesser extent than Ingres' or Wontner's paintings, the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* also subtly evokes sensuality. If the viewer does not assume that these women are reading, as the title suggests, the women may be viewed in a less intellectual light and, instead, be perceived as intimates.

While the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* may be situated in a long trajectory of Orientalist depictions of Middle Eastern women, Allison Saltzman, the artist who designed the cover, asserts that she did not intentionally produce an Orientalist image. In a recent interview I conducted by email with Saltzman, I asked: "When you were designing the cover, were you wary about stereotypes regarding Muslim women? How, if at all, did you try to avoid these stereotypes?"

Saltzman replied:

Yes, I was wary of stereotyping Muslim/Arab women when I was looking for photos. I was walking a fine line though: we needed the women to be wearing headscarves, so that they'd be identifiable to the American book-buying public as Muslim/Arab. But otherwise, we wanted them to look like any other women in a book group: absorbed in reading, united in friendship. We wanted to keep the overall mood of the cover positive. We did not want to get into the politics against which the book group was rebelling.<sup>85</sup>

Saltzman's conscious awareness of stereotyping Middle Eastern women provides intriguing insight into the selection of the cover photo. Random House, the publisher of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, appears to have been eager to provide an image of Iranian women that American audiences would regard as foreign in a familiar way. This deliberate form of representation functions within the definition of "exoticism" put forth by Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. In this capacity, the decision to include veiled women on the cover seems to have been strategic, as the publisher sought to attract a target audience.

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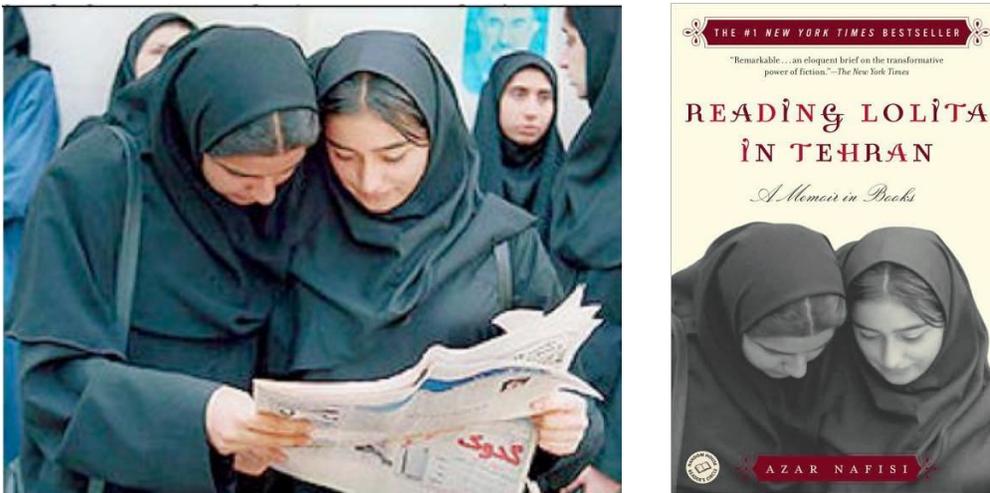
<sup>84</sup> Carol Delaney, "Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society," *Anthropological Quarterly* 67.4 (1994): 161.

<sup>85</sup> Allison Saltzman, Personal Interview, Email, 8 January 2013.

Though Saltzman outwardly stated in our interview that Random House was not interested in making a political statement with the cover art, the origins of the photo inevitably imbue the cover with political undertones. Saltzman explains the origins of the photo:

I do remember that when I was researching imagery for that cover, it was next to impossible to find photographs of Iranian women reading. Iranian women doing anything, actually. American photo agencies didn't have much inventory of Middle Eastern women in general—that's definitely improved in the 10 years since, now that Americans are much more interested in that culture. But Nafisi's book was probably the first of her kind... I found that photo from a news agency, and the girls in it were actually reading a newspaper, not a book.<sup>86</sup>

Though Saltzman's intent appears to have been to simply find an image of Iranian women reading, her use of this particular photo is problematic. The photographed women were actually reading the results of a parliamentary election in Iran in February 2000:



**Figure 13: Cover Inspiration: Reading Lolita in Tehran**  
 Photo Credits: Al-Ahram Weekly Issue No. 797 (June 1-7 2006).

By viewing the original photograph with the cover image, it becomes clear that Saltzman (and, ultimately, Random House) has completely (if unintentionally) stripped the image of its political implications. Dabashi writes:

The cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is an iconic burglary from the press, distorted and staged in a frame for an entirely different purpose than when it was taken... Cropping the

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

newspaper, their classmates behind them, and a perfectly visible photograph of President Khatami — the iconic representation of the reformist movement — out of the picture and suggesting that the two young women are reading "Lolita" strips them of their moral intelligence and their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland, ushering them into a colonial harem.<sup>87</sup>

Dabashi's claim that the use of this photo may be regarded as an "iconic burglary from the press" is not unjustifiable. The definition of "burglary" implies breaking or entering into a space with the intent to steal. Dabashi's concern stems from that fact that a photo featuring veiled women openly reading about their nation's politics was bought and manipulated for profit. No longer active participants in the democratic scene, the women have been relegated to the status of simple figures wearing *hijabs*, all but eliminating their political mindfulness and motivations. Indeed, the fact that the bottom half of the photo has been cropped, removing any concrete notion of reading, effectively diminishes the intelligence of the girls.

Although Dabashi's critique is extensive, he fails to address the most problematic aspect of the cover. There is a discrepancy between the stereotypically veiled and robed women depicted on the cover and the varied descriptions of the eclectic women who populate the text. Nafisi begins her memoir with detailed descriptions of the appearances of the seven women in her reading group. Within the privacy of Nafisi's home, the young women reveal their individual personalities through their appearances:

I have the two photographs in front of me now. In the first there are seven women, standing against a white wall. 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. In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall. Only 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.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Hamid Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire," Al-Ahram Issue No. 797 (June 1-7, 2006) <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm>>.

<sup>88</sup> Nafisi 4.

Nafisi further describes the women in her reading group, detailing “Manna, in a white T-shirt and jeans... [with] her withdrawn and private nature.” She also describes “outrageous and outspoken” Azin, a girl who “relished the shock value of her actions and comments, and often clashed with Mahshid and Manna.”<sup>89</sup> These vibrant descriptions reveal that the women are not a homogenous group; instead, they have different, oftentimes conflicting personalities.

In the aforementioned physical characterizations of the members of her reading group, Nafisi reveals to readers the ways in which these women appear in both the public and private spheres. Her descriptions of these photos raise the following question: What does it mean to circulate to the world a description of how these women look inside a private space? Though one may interpret these descriptions as exploitative, they are exploitative in a way that stands in direct opposition to Dabashi’s account of the cover. Dabashi argues that the women on the cover are symbolically ushered *into* a colonial harem. In contrast, Nafisi symbolically *removes* these women from a safe and private space by describing these photos in her memoir.

Nafisi’s memoir was almost certainly the first of its kind. Among those inclined to read the book in reductive, crude terms, the memoir sparked a resurgence of tell-all narratives about victimized women in the Middle East at a moment when it was very profitable to do so. One cannot say whether Random House decided to publish this memoir because the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks fostered interest in Iranian women. It is clear, however, that the publishing house marketed the text in a way that made the general public take notice. These marketing schemes intersected with Orientalism, which likely exacerbated damaging stereotypes about Iranian culture and Iranian women.

## **II. *Persepolis*: Two Sets of Cover Art with Two Sets of Implications**

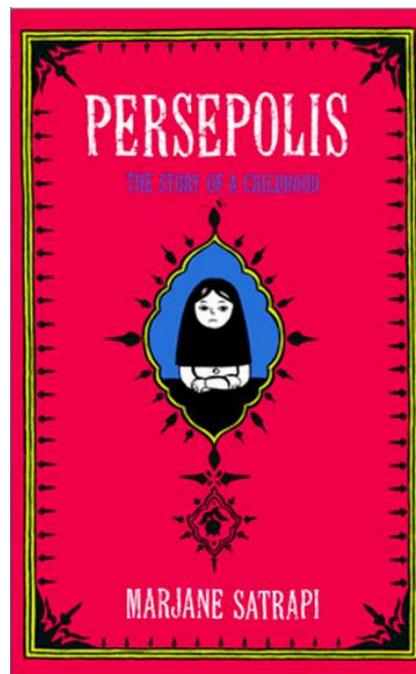
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<sup>89</sup> Nafisi 4-5.

Several scholars and critics have noted that *Persepolis* offers a more nuanced and complex image of Iranian woman than is presented in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In the article, “Estranging the Familiar: ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Satrapi’s *Persepolis*,” scholars Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley argue,

*Reading Lolita* is, in many ways, the antithesis of *Persepolis*... While *Persepolis* challenges Western preconceptions of Iran and Iranian women, [*Reading*] *Lolita* [*in Tehran*] merely reinforces them... Nafisi panders to the dominant Western image of veiled Iranian women as oppressed and abject.<sup>90</sup>

The image featured on the cover of *Persepolis* complicates Naghibi and O’Malley’s argument:



**Figure 14: The Front Cover of Persepolis**

*Photo Credits: Design by Jean-Christophe Menu, Illustration by Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis.*

This illustration depicts an Iranian female that is similar to the veiled, “oppressed and abject” women seen on nightly news programs in the United States. In this image, a veil covers Marji’s hair and upper body. Her arms are crossed and her facial expression suggests discontent. Although the text suggests that Marji is largely westernized in her tastes and behaviors (a theme discussed in Chapter

<sup>90</sup> Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley, “Estranging the Familiar ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* [1],” *English Studies in Canada* 31.1-2 (2005): 224-225.

One), this cover art conforms to a stereotypical image of Iranian females as unhappily veiled. The absence of Western objects on the cover may be an indicator that the publisher believed that a familiarly “exotic” looking illustration would be more marketable to an American audience. The image garners further significance upon realization that Satrapi herself illustrated the image of Marji on the cover. In this capacity, while the covers of both *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis* pander to the dominant Western perception of Iranian females as oppressed and veiled, Satrapi, as the producer of her cover art, had a more pronounced role in her cover’s stereotypical depiction of Iranian girls and women.

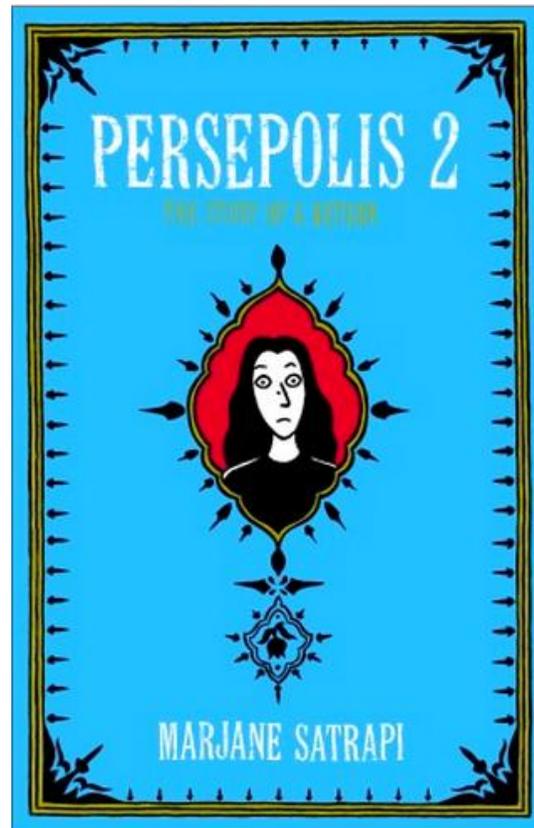
The hardcover edition of *Persepolis I* features the same artwork as does the paperback. And yet, the fact that the artwork is printed on a book jacket — that is, the paper-made outer covering of the hardcover book — provides an additional medium for analysis of the memoir. In terms of its very function, the book jacket (also known as the “dust jacket”) may serve as a “metaphorical veil,” completely covering its source book. In his review of *Persepolis* for *Time Magazine* titled, “An Iranian Girlhood,” journalist Andrew D. Arnold describes the aesthetics of the memoir, noting, “...the luxurious quality of the production — a hardcover with a die-cut dust-jacket that lets a character peek through from the cover.”<sup>91</sup> The dust jacket entices the reader to open the book and to discover the “veiled” world of femininity in Iran. Scholar Manuela Costantino writes in her article, “Marji: Popular Commix Heroine Breathing Life into the Writing of History,” “The ‘open window’ revealing the child beckons the reader inside the book. In this way, opening the memoir and/or removing the dust jacket functions as a form of metaphorical unveiling.”<sup>92</sup> In this capacity, Marji becomes a fascinatingly “exotic” subject available to the Western consumer’s gaze.

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<sup>91</sup> Andrew D. Arnold, “An Iranian Girlhood,” *Time Magazine* 16 May 16 2003. <<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,452401,00.html>>.

<sup>92</sup> Manuela Costantino, “Marji: Popular Commix Heroine Breathing Life into the Writing of History,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38.3 (2008): 436.

While the cover of *Persepolis 1* features a younger, pre-adolescent Marji wearing a veil, Marji is presented as an unveiled teenager on the cover of *Persepolis 2*:



**Figure 15: The Front Cover of *Persepolis 2***

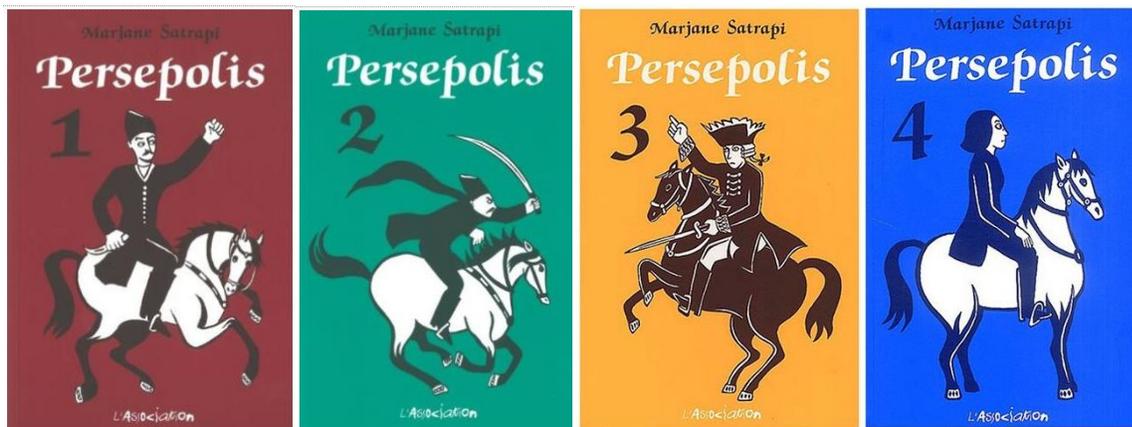
*Photo Credits: Design by Jean-Christophe Menu, Illustration by Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis 2.*

This drawing may be regarded as the antithesis of the sensual depictions of women in the Orientalist paintings addressed in the first section of this chapter. On this cover, Marji looks almost genderless: she wears plain black clothing with no jewelry, makeup, or (given Marji’s penchant for Western culture) other symbols of Western femininity. The only indicator of femininity is her hair. Even so, the exposure of her hair loses some of its sensual implications upon realization that, in *Persepolis 2*, Marji is in Vienna, a region in which exposed hair is not sexually taboo. Her non-sexualized appearance may very well be Satrapi’s way of rejecting the Orientalist perception of women from the Middle East as erotic objects. The unveiled post-adolescent Marji is not the “exotic” beauty depicted

in romanticized paintings, shattering the illusion of unbridled sensuality and femininity hidden just beneath the veil.

The facial expressions of the veiled and unveiled Marji on the covers of *Persepolis 1* and *Persepolis 2*, respectively, convey very different messages to the American consumer. The portrait featured on the cover of *Persepolis 1* may be easily comprehended. The image of a veiled woman who looks dejected may automatically suggest to a Western reader that she is not only unhappy to be wearing the veil, but, more broadly, is unhappy to be living under an Islamic regime. On the cover of *Persepolis 2*, an unveiled Marji looks confused and somewhat displaced. This image is less direct and more difficult for the Western reader to make sense of. Her confused look stems from the fact that she feels as though she doesn't belong, be it in Iran, her home country, or in Vienna, the Westernized city in which she resides throughout much of *Persepolis 2*.

Before Satrapi's memoir was released in America, it was critically acclaimed in France.<sup>93</sup> The French publishing house L'Association first published *Persepolis* in 2000 in four volumes. The covers of these four volumes differ significantly from the American covers:



**Figure 16: The French Covers of *Persepolis***

*Photo Credits: Cover Design by L'Association, Persepolis 1-4 (Paris: L'Association, 2000-2003).*

<sup>93</sup> According to Costantino, the first volume of the memoir sold 20,000 copies in one year and won the 2001 Alph'Art Coup de Coeur Prize in Angouleme. In 2003, volumes 3 and 4 of *Persepolis* were serialized in the French newspaper *Liberation*. As of 2008, over 400,000 volumes of the memoir have been sold in France and over a million have been sold internationally. Costantino 431.

In contrast to the American editions of *Persepolis*, rather than focusing on the stark image of a lonely Marji, these cover illustrations are drawn from moments in Persian history. In this capacity, the artwork deviates from the narrative itself. The French covers redirect the focus from the characters of the text (and, indeed, in the first three volumes, from women) to Iranian history.

There are several reasons why this particular set of illustrations would be appealing to a French audience. As Costantino notes, “These covers appeal (even subconsciously in the way advertising often does) to the French buyers’ strong sense of pride in heroic rebels fighting against foreign invasion in order to protect freedom and a sense of national identity.”<sup>94</sup> The covers of volumes 1, 2, and 4 each feature a figure riding a white horse that is facing east. On the cover of *Persepolis 3*, a figure, which appears to be a British conqueror, rides a black horse and faces west. The color of the horse and direction the horse is facing are, symbolically, very significant. These design choices may reflect the idea that British colonial rule marked a “dark” (the black horse) “turn” (the horse faces the opposite direction) in Iran’s history. Indeed, many Iranians regard the coercion used by the British government to obtain control of Iran’s oil reserves as one of the foremost reasons why their country was unable to nationalize its oil and become a democratic country.<sup>95</sup> In this context, the horse may be drawn black to symbolically convey the idea of Iran’s oil supply.

In contrast to the first three volumes, on the cover of *Persepolis 4*, Marjane is clearly illustrated. Several scholars have suggested that the illustration featured on volume 4 is reminiscent of Joan of Arc, the heroine of both Catholicism and French legend.<sup>96</sup> Joan of Arc remains, of course,

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<sup>94</sup> Costantino 433.

<sup>95</sup> According to Ansari in *Confronting Iran*, in the early twentieth century, the British government obtained control of Iran’s natural oil resources under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). In 1951, the democratically elected Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, advocated for the nationalization of Iranian oil. Churchill, who saw Mosaddeq as a threat to Britain’s economy, arranged a coup with the CIA and overthrew Mosaddeq in 1953. Ansari 19-55.

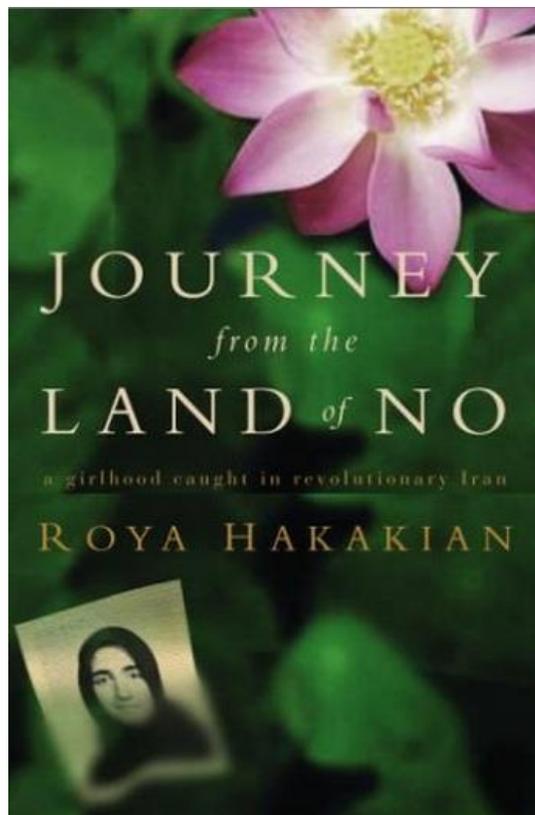
<sup>96</sup> Costantino 433.

a widely admired figure in France, and the cover's resemblance to the religious figure would certainly have appealed to a French audience. Marji may fulfill a similar role, in that she is a brave and defiant character; for example, she courageously contests her teacher's lessons on the Islamic Republic. Marji also does not confine herself to gender roles. As a child, she declares that she wants to be a prophet, a role that, of course, has historically been assumed by men. These examples serve to establish Marji as a gallant figure who defies convention, much like Joan of Arc.

Unlike Random House, L'Association did not, apparently, view the veil as an important marketing technique. The absence of the veil implies that the French publisher did not feel the need to use the *hijab* as a means by which to signify to readers that the memoir is about the Islamic world. While the American covers present either an unhappily veiled pre-adolescent girl or a displaced, unveiled woman, the French editions of *Persepolis* present an engrossing depiction of Iranian history. In the fourth and final French volume, the figure of Marji represents the face of women in Iran — calm with stoic power.

### **III: Representations of Foreignness on the Covers of *Journey from the Land of No and Even After All This Time***

Unlike the veiled females featured on the covers of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis I*, the woman displayed on the cover of *Journey from the Land of No* does not function as the focal point:



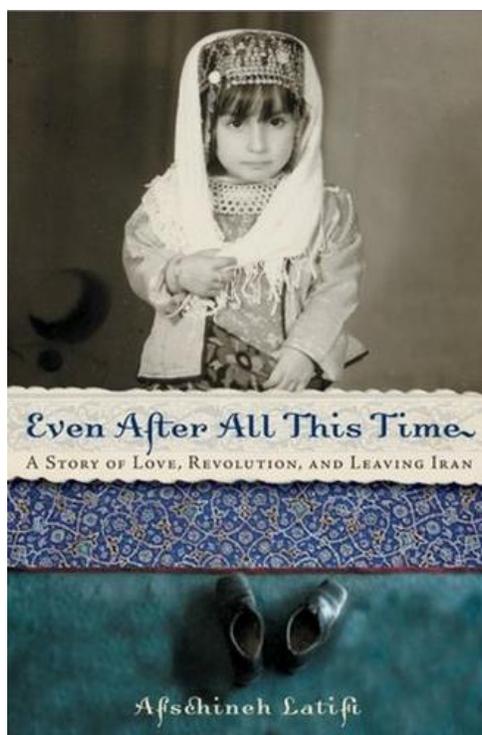
**Figure 17: The Front Cover of Journey From the Land of No**  
**Photo Credits: Design by Elina D. Nudelman, Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).**

The eye is not drawn to the partially obscured photograph of a veiled woman; indeed, its placement at the bottom left corner of the cover makes it almost an afterthought. This photograph is highly symbolic, though. The picture appears old and yellowed, and it is partially submerged in dark, murky waters, effectively obscuring the woman's face. This cover art likely has dual implications. With regards to the development of the memoir itself, the cover art may suggest that Hakakian's own story (like the partially obscured face) has been hidden or concealed until now. In a broader sense, the cover art may also be interpreted as a commentary on Iranian society, underscoring the long (hence, yellowed image) concealed presence of women as a population in Iran.

With the image relegated to the corner, the title becomes the focal point of the cover of *Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*. The title presents Iran as a

fundamentalist society in which women lack liberties. In an interview I conducted with Hakakian, the author revealed that the conception of the title of her memoir took place during a meeting with her publishers. She describes her rationale for choosing the title, stating, “I thought of Iran, you know, growing up there as a girl, that the most common answer you got there was ‘no.’ So I think it made sense to look at Iran as sort of a ‘land of no.’”<sup>97</sup> Referring to Iran as a “land of no” conjures up images of a very restrictive, suffocating environment in which to grow and develop. The title causes the reader to pause and consider what it must have been like to experience “girlhood” under a strict Islamic regime.

In contrast, the cover of Afschineh Latifi’s memoir, *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran*, features a photograph of a veiled girl as its focal point:



**Figure 18: The Front Cover of *Even After All This Time***  
*Photo Credits: Design by Laura Blost, *Even After All This Time* (New York: ReganBooks, 2005).*

<sup>97</sup> Roya Hakakian, Personal interview, Skype, 8 January 2013.

Since Latifi rarely discusses wearing the veil in her memoir, it seems odd that this particular photograph was chosen for the cover. In the image, Afschineh's sister, Afsaneh, is draped in a veil and wears a jeweled crown and a chained bracelet ring. These forms of intricate ornamentation, as previously seen (though in a much more sexual manner) in Wouter's painting, render the child exotic and unknown to an American audience.

Interestingly, Latifi includes photographs of herself and her family during her adolescence. In nearly all of these pictures, the family is seen wearing Westernized clothing. In a telephone interview I conducted with Latifi, she describes why, given its obvious inconsistency with the photographs displayed throughout the memoir, this unconventional photograph was chosen for the cover:

[My publisher and I] chose it together. I submitted some photographs, and that particular picture was chosen by Judith Regan. [Regan is the publisher and founder of ReganBooks, a division of HarperCollins that ended in late 2006]. We sat down with a book cover designer, and we finalized it, but the actual picture was among a stack of pictures I submitted, and I said I would like to do a book cover with a personal picture. And that's of my sister. And I said these are the pictures I like, and Judith saw that picture and said, "This is it. This is what the cover will be."<sup>98</sup>

It is interesting to contemplate Judith Regan's reasoning for deciding upon this photograph. The picture is exotic, inevitably invoking images of the Middle East from several decades past. In this capacity, Regan likely chose this photograph because she believed its "foreignness" would be appealing to an American audience. In this particular image, a Middle Eastern girl is dressing much older than she actually is, gazing at the camera in a manner that, in an older woman, would likely be deemed "sexual." Indeed, her gaze is vaguely reminiscent of *La Grand Odalisque*, in which the painted female figure looks directly at the observer.

The memoir *Even After All This Time* has not been featured on the *New York Times*' Bestseller List, nor has it won any major awards. In the context of this thesis, the fact that this memoir was published and distributed with a very exotic cover (not only the image of the young girl, but also the

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<sup>98</sup> Afschineh Latifi, Personal Interview, Telephone, 10 January 2013.

stereotypical usage of a calligraphic font and mosaic tiling), but was not a bestseller is incredibly important. This cover submits to blatant stereotypes of the Middle East in a way that the three other memoirs do not.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

Across America, different memoirs featuring images of veiled women from the Middle East are displayed on bookstore shelves. This form of representation causes many Western readers to feel a sense of foreignness and an immediate desire to place these women in the category of “Other.” For today’s American consumers, the veil continues to function as a monolithic sign of subjugation and, by extension, misogyny. Although the images featured on these covers generate interest not only for the memoirs themselves, but also for the women who have written them, the pictures fail to convey information regarding Iranian women’s lives in post-revolutionary Iran. One must look beyond the cover — and indeed, beyond the veil — in order to interpret and study these texts in a way that resists ethnocentrism.

### CHAPTER 3

#### UNCOVERING MANICHEAN LANGUAGE IN BOOK REVIEWS

Just as the cover art influences the ways in which readers respond to these memoirs, so too do American book reviews. In reviews of these texts, critics often discuss Iran and its relationship to the United States in oversimplified terms. Caustic words like “totalitarianism,” “oppression,” and “danger” are utilized at an alarming rate. Many of the critics who reviewed these memoirs either unconsciously or consciously wrote their reviews within a Manichean discourse that reinforced the dichotomy between “good” and “evil.” Why was this discourse co-opted by so many critics in the United States? I would argue that the tumultuous political environment in which these texts were read ultimately influenced critics. In the article “9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media,” critical theorist Douglas Kellner provides evidence that the American broadcasting media, as well as the Bush Administration, employed Manichean discourse in their response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks.<sup>99</sup> The ubiquitous nature of this language prompted many Americans to look at the relationship between the United States and Iran in terms of “good” and “evil.”

In this section, we will analyze reviews of each of these memoirs featured not only on the publishers’ websites, but also within the books themselves (be it on the book jacket or within the first few pages of the print editions of each book). Many of these reviews use Manichean discourse, though some do so more blatantly than others. Though the authorship of these reviews clearly spans several demographics, many were penned by Western feminists; this subset of reviewers typically fixate on the idea of a “shared” gender, as well as the apparent victimization of Iranian women. This outlook on Iranian women as a homogenous group in need of rescue aligns seamlessly with Manichean discourse.

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<sup>99</sup> Kellner 45.

Finally, we will also broaden our perception of the role of “The Critic” by exploring the reviews of “typical” American readers on Amazon.com. According to *Time Magazine*, since its inception in 1995, Amazon.com has established itself as the world’s leading online retailer.<sup>100</sup> In this capacity, Amazon.com provides not only a medium through which Americans can easily and efficiently access/purchase texts, but also a forum within which one can read comments and critiques offered by American consumers. For the purpose of this thesis, these reviews provide an opportunity to gauge the sentiments of Americans towards each of my four primary texts, as these reviews not only indicate a reader’s starred rating of each book, but also provide a free space in which to record the reader’s feelings or perceptions. Many of these time-stamped reviews also offer an indication of a reader’s impression of each text in the context of the political climate (specifically, its relation to September 11<sup>th</sup>) at the time the review was written. By employing Amazon.com, we may explore the words/viewpoints of people who are oftentimes largely uneducated about Iran, excepting the information they have obtained from mass media representations. As one Amazon consumer wrote in his review of the memoir, *Journey From the Land of No*, “Like most Americans (yes, I am humble enough to admit), I approached the book without knowing much about this country or her people.”<sup>101</sup>

Many of the consumers who write the Amazon.com reviews express several shared interests, including the desire for insight on the subject of “Islamic fundamentalism,” the desire to (re)educate themselves on the “atrocities” and “horrors” of the Islamic Revolution, and the desire to learn about Iranian women.<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, these themes are also emphasized in many of the formal literary criticisms of each memoir, allowing for interesting comparisons to be made between the “average”

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<sup>100</sup> Kayla Webley, “A Brief History of Online Shopping,” *Time Magazine* 16 July 16, 2010 <<http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,2004089,00.html>>.

<sup>101</sup> R.B. Kimmel, “A Compelling Personal Account of Iran,” *Amazon.com* (August 7, 2009). <[http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A3JZHBCZCARSZ0/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_pdp](http://www.amazon.com/gp/pdp/profile/A3JZHBCZCARSZ0/ref=cm_cr_pr_pdp)>.

<sup>102</sup> Whitlock uses similar language to describe Amazon.com reviews of the life narratives of Afghan women.

Whitlock 62.

American reader and the supposedly well-informed literary critic. In this chapter, I argue that analyzing reviews is important because critics — both formal and informal — have the power to influence not only whether or not an American consumer decides to read a text, but also *how* they read a text.

As one reviewer's opinions certainly are not indicative of the views of an entire readership, I have elected to select those reviews that Amazon.com readers have deemed "Most Helpful." The designation of "Most Helpful" is not contingent on the qualification of the reviewer in question or on whether the views align with those of other critics; rather, "Most Helpful" is determined by Amazon.com users in a vote-based system. While the "Most Helpful" reviews cannot be used to generalize American viewpoints (in the same way one critic's voice cannot be used to generalize a body of criticism of a work), the "Most Helpful" reviews are the most seen/most voted upon reviews within the Amazon.com profile of a text.

Some critics of this thesis may find fault with this chapter's inclusion of only a select few reviews of each memoir. I admit freely that the critiques utilized in this chapter do, at times, present rather extreme or polarizing views of the text in question. However, I contend that these reviews, presented in association with one another, help to elucidate the multiple, and often opposing, theoretical viewpoints that comprise the body of criticism — be it either academic or consumer in nature — available on these texts.

### **I. Culture Clashes and *Reading Lolita in Tehran***

The opening pages of the print edition of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* feature over twenty laudatory reviews from mainstream media outlets, scholars, and western feminists. In this section, I analyze three reviews featured in the memoir, as well as the "Most Helpful" consumer review of the memoir on Amazon.com. Each review either directly or indirectly conforms to Manichean discourse.

One of the most prominent figures to praise Nafisi's memoir is Bernard Lewis, the well-known scholar in Oriental studies and the Ottoman Empire. In his review of the memoir, Lewis writes, "[*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is] about teaching Western literature in revolutionary Iran, with profound and fascinating insights into both. A masterpiece."<sup>103</sup> Though Lewis' rather superficial review fails to offer much insight into Iran other than the fact that a Revolution took place there, his reputation as a scholar who writes within the "clash of civilizations" discourse precedes him. Lewis is a colleague of the late Samuel Huntington, the well-known political scientist who wrote the 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In the article, "Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns," feminist scholar Catherine Burwell, borrowing from the ideas of fellow critic Adam Sabra, discusses Huntington's views. She writes, Huntington's "thesis presents a Manichean view of the world, in which an essentialized Islam 'constitutes the anti-West, the perennial opponent to Western values of democracy and individual liberty.'"<sup>104</sup> Burwell elaborates, "Though presenting itself as a work of history, [Huntington's text] is in fact largely ahistorical, erasing records of Euro-American colonialism and replacing them with a series of myths, recycled images and stereotypes dating back as far as the Crusades."<sup>105</sup>

In 2002, Lewis propelled the "the clash of civilizations" theory into the political spotlight with the release of his book, *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. In the text, Lewis argues that the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks "can be explained by an ideological difference between Islam and the West, between tradition and modernity."<sup>106</sup> Media commentators and the public frequently cited Lewis in an effort to understand how and why the

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<sup>103</sup> Nafisi iv.

<sup>104</sup> Burwell directly quotes Sabra from his article "What is Wrong with What Went Wrong?" Middle East Report Online, August 2003 <<http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/what-wrong-what-went-wrong>>

Burwell 66.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

horrific attacks occurred.<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, Lewis' book allowed the American public to "other" the Middle East, distancing the region from the United States' sense of "good."

In light of Lewis' influence on post-9/11 America, we may postulate that the Manichean "clash of civilizations" theory became nearly ingrained in cultural perceptions of the Middle East; in this capacity, by perpetuating the notion of a "bad" Middle East, Lewis' theories — and the promotion of said theories by the media and American readership at large — may have swayed consumers to read Nafisi's memoir reductively. Burwell accurately describes why this mode of reading is problematic. She states,

When heterogeneous histories are reduced to the myth of an unchanging monolith, single texts may be perceived as representing 'the truth' about large and diverse populations. Thus, reading a book about a single Iranian woman may be perceived as enough to 'know' not only these women, but also the history of the Middle East and its 'oppression' of women.<sup>108</sup>

In this line of thought, readers may inadvertently disregard the progressive, inspiring narratives of the four memoirs considered here; instead, their reading may be obscured by a preconceived image of Iran as a homogenously "evil" entity with dejected, oppressed people.

In the print edition of the memoir, a review by Geraldine Brooks is featured directly below Lewis' remarks. Brooks herself is well known as an Australian-American journalist and foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>109</sup> In her review, Brooks subtly (and perhaps unintentionally) describes the relationship between the West and the East within the Manichean dichotomy of "good" and "evil." She writes:

Anyone who has ever belonged to a book group must read this book. Azar Nafisi takes us into the vivid lives of eight women who must meet in secret to explore the forbidden fiction of the west. It is at once a celebration of the power of the novel and a cry of outrage at the

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<sup>107</sup> Adam Sabra, "What is Wrong with What Went Wrong?" Middle East Report Online Web. 4 February 2013 <<http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/what-wrong-what-went-wrong>>.

<sup>108</sup> Burwell 66.

<sup>109</sup> The publisher decides not only which reviews to publish, but also the order in which to feature them. This method of selection/organization can help influence readers who are approaching the work with little or no prior critical exposure.

reality in which these women are trapped. The ayatollahs don't know it, but Nafisi is one of the heroes of the Islamic Republic.<sup>110</sup>

In this assessment, Brooks states that the memoir celebrates “the power of the novel.” Historically speaking, novels rose to popularity in eighteenth century Europe, and authors in Western Europe and North America have since dominated this literary genre. Therefore, we may regard the novel as a common avenue for Western artistic expression. As such, Brooks indirectly (and, again, perhaps unintentionally) argues that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* celebrates “the power” of the West. She also states that the memoir is a “cry of outrage at the reality in which these women are trapped.” In this context, “reality” stands for the political and social environment of post-revolutionary Iran. By associating the Islamic Republic with the idea of “trapped women,” Brooks ultimately presents Iran as a bleakly oppressive land from which women cannot escape.

Brooks' views on Iranian society garner further significance upon realization that the author has published her own book about women in the Middle East. In 1995, prior to the influx of texts associated with the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Brooks' *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* attained bestseller status in the United States. *Nine Parts* tells the story of her “intrepid journey toward an understanding of the women behind the veils, and of the often contradictory political, religious, and cultural forces that shape their lives.”<sup>111</sup> The book is highly ethnocentric, reinforcing a monolithic image of Islam in which Muslim women are “victims of male oppression.”<sup>112</sup> The subject matter of Brooks' own book necessitates a reevaluation of her review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Whether Brooks has praised the depiction of “trapped women” because such a view correlates to her beliefs, or if she simply felt that such a portrayal would appeal to

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<sup>110</sup> Nafisi iv.

<sup>111</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *Nine Parts of Desire*, [geraldinebrooks.com](http://geraldinebrooks.com) 10 January 2013 <<http://geraldinebrooks.com/the-books/nine-parts-of-desire/>>.

<sup>112</sup> Roksana Bahramitash, “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14.2 (New York: Routledge, 2005): 228.

American audiences is irrelevant; her review ultimately promotes a viewpoint in which Iran is othered as a “bad” nation.

Arguably the most famous author featured on the list of admiring reviews is Margaret Atwood, the highly acclaimed poet, novelist, and self-proclaimed feminist. Atwood’s review reads: “Stunning... a literary life raft on Iran’s fundamentalist sea... all readers should read it.”<sup>113</sup> This review differs from those previously mentioned because it uses a vivid metaphor of a life raft, drifting upon a “fundamentalist sea” as a means by which to present Iranian society as dangerous and tumultuous. Interestingly, these comments represent only a brief excerpt of Atwood’s more comprehensive review of the memoir. In the original review, Atwood refers to Nafisi’s *book group* (not the book itself) as a life raft for the women involved in it. Atwood writes, “[T]here is a book group in *Reading Lolita*, but it is more like a life raft than an after-work social gathering.”<sup>114</sup> The publisher’s decision to excerpt a portion of the review that equates the *memoir* with a life raft, rather than the book club, ultimately then begs the question: for whom is the book meant to serve as a metaphorical life raft? Given that the book is “life raft” upon a “fundamentalist sea,” it may be concluded that the intent of Atwood’s review is that the memoir functions as a life raft for Iranians themselves, revealing to the world the extent of the atrocities they faced during the Revolution and which continue to plague the country to this day.

Just as many critics write their reviews within a Manichean framework, many Amazon.com reviewers appear to follow suit, if only inadvertently. For example, an excerpt from the “Most Helpful” customer review featured on the Amazon.com profile of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, reads:

The author, now living in the US, tells of almost two decades in Iran, as a teacher of English and American literature. She tells of the great hopes for reform after the fall of the Shah and the return from exile of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and with her we watch in horror as the

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<sup>113</sup> Nafisi back cover.

<sup>114</sup> Margaret Atwood, “The Book Lover’s Tale: Using literature to stay afloat in a fundamentalist sea,” *Literary Review of Canada* (Toronto: September, 2003) <<http://reviewcanada.ca/reviews/2003/09/01/the-book-lover-s-tale/>>.

revolution takes Iran by force instead into its medieval past. There are arrests, murders, and executions and those who can, flee to the West.<sup>115</sup>

This review, written by a self-proclaimed “teacher, writer, copy editor from Los Angeles,” describes the ways in which the Islamic Revolution is portrayed in the memoir. His statement that, “[W]e [American readers] watch in horror as the revolution takes Iran by force...” has historical implications. In the late 1970s, American journalists and politicians regularly used the word “horror” in their descriptions of the Iran Hostage Crisis and the Islamic Revolution. President Carter, speaking of deaths associated with the Hostage Crisis, told the *New York Times* that he was “filled with ‘abhorrence and *horror*’” [emphasis added] at the Crisis’ violation of “all principles of humanity and decency.”<sup>116</sup> Additionally, A *Wall Street Journal* article, dated May 14, 1979 (six months before the Hostage Crisis would captivate and shake the nation), described the execution of civilians as an event “belong[ing] in the growing category of world *horrors* about which the U.S. now seems powerless to do anything” [emphasis added].<sup>117</sup> Even articles written years later to reflect upon the Hostage Crisis reflect this discourse, most notably an article in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled “Hostages forever held in *horror’s* grip” [emphasis added].<sup>118</sup> The fact that the same negatively connoted word used in the 1970s is still used today not only underscores the perception of Iran as a nation of “horrors,” but also implicitly suggests that Iran has remained a stagnant nation since the time of the Revolution.

The “Most Helpful” review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* further submits to Manichean discourse by suggesting that Iran is a locale from which to flee. The reviewer writes that “those who can, flee to the West.” This line is particularly troubling, as the reviewer establishes the West as a

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<sup>115</sup> Ronald Scheer, “Sex with a man you loathe...,” [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/review/R16MFLOOL7MN8X/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0812979303&nodeID=283155&store=books) 21 July 2003 <[http://www.amazon.com/review/R16MFLOOL7MN8X/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0812979303&nodeID=283155&store=books](http://www.amazon.com/review/R16MFLOOL7MN8X/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0812979303&nodeID=283155&store=books)>.

<sup>116</sup> William K. Stevens, “OUTRAGE OVER BODIES; President Sees a Violation of Decency in Iranian Display of 8 Dead Commitment to Freeing 53 Carter, Visiting Wounded, Voices Outrage at Iranians,” *The New York Times* 29 April 1980.

<sup>117</sup> “Revolutionary Justice,” *The Wall Street Journal* 1979 May 14.

<sup>118</sup> Tracey Harden, “Hostages Forever Held in Horror’s Grip,” *The Chicago Tribune* 3 November 1985.

veritable safe haven, a place of refuge and security to which to flee from the “horrors” of Iran. The fact that only “those who *can*” [emphasis added] flee are able to do so, is also concerning. The reviewer does not specify what means enable an individual to flee from Iran, but implicitly suggests that the act of leaving requires certain financial, political, and/or social standing(s) not possessed by all Iranians. If, as the reviewer suggests, Iran is “evil” and the West is “good,” this goodness is not available to all.

The memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* received an overwhelming amount of praise by both well-known authors and American consumers. These reviews provide evidence that the success of this personal narrative did not substantially change American perceptions of the relationship between Iran and the United States. Amazon.com reviewers contrast the “horror” and “tyranny” of Iranian society with the prevailing values of “democracy” and “freedom” in the United States. Though one may certainly stumble upon moments in the memoir that speak to these claims, this Orientalist interpretation of the memoir is both reductive and futile. Though Nafisi uses the life narrative form as a way to discuss her grievances with post-revolutionary Iran in a way that tends to demonize the Iranian government, she also describes the unique beauty of Iran and the compassionate nature of many of its people.

## **II. *Persepolis*: An (Ironically) Less Black and White Outlook**

As in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, critics and Amazon.com consumers also discussed the relationship between Iran and the United States in the Manichean framework with regards to *Persepolis I*. Several critics and Amazon.com consumers, however, suggest that the memoir persuades readers to look past the dichotomy of “good” versus “evil.” In this section, we will examine reviews that both conform to and reject Manichean discourse.

American feminist Gloria Steinem’s review of *Persepolis I*, featured on both the back cover of the print edition of the book and on the publisher’s website, offers a shockingly reductive

interpretation of the memoir. Steinem writes, “You’ve never seen anything like *Persepolis* — the intimacy of a memoir, the irresistibility [*sic*] of a comic book, and the political depth of a the [*sic*] conflict between fundamentalism and democracy. Marjane Satrapi may have given us a new genre.”<sup>119</sup> Steinem’s statement that the memoir has “the political depth” of “the conflict between fundamentalism and democracy” is unclear and even misleading. Steinem may be referring to the “conflict” between the fundamentalist regime and the more liberal, democratic Iranians like Satrapi’s parents, or her statement may refer to the “conflict” between the fundamentalist Islamic Republic and the democratic United States. In the latter interpretation, the language reinforces the idea that these two nations are opposing extremes; given the implicit negative connotation of the word “fundamentalism” and the positive connotation of “democratic,” this comparison automatically casts a shadow over Iran, while glorifying the West.

While numerous reviews featured on the back cover of *Persepolis I* and the publisher’s website provide politically charged readings similar to Steinem’s, several reviewers reject this Manichean outlook. For example, Tariq Ali, the author of *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (2002), writes: “This witty, moving and illuminating book demonstrates graphically why the future of Iran lies with neither the clerics nor the American Empire.”<sup>120</sup> Instead of presenting Iran through the lens of ideologically opposing powers, Ali astutely notes that *Persepolis* unveils the rather remarkable lives of Iranian citizens. Meanwhile, Terrence Ward, author of the memoir, *Searching for Hassan* (2002), notes:

Readers who have always wanted to look beyond political headlines and CNN’s clichés should plunge into this unique illustrated story. Let Marji be your trusted companion, follow her into the warmth of a Persian home and out along Tehran’s turbulent streets during those heady days of revolution. *Persepolis* opens a rare door to understanding of events that still

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<sup>119</sup> “[Persepolis: Praise & Awards](http://www.randomhouse.com/book/160890/persepolis-by-marjane-satrapi#praise&awards),” [Random House](http://www.randomhouse.com/book/160890/persepolis-by-marjane-satrapi#praise&awards)

<<http://www.randomhouse.com/book/160890/persepolis-by-marjane-satrapi#praise&awards>>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

haunt America, while shining a bright light on the personal humanity and humor so much alive in Iranian families today.<sup>121</sup>

In both reviews, the critics applaud *Persepolis* because it provides a unique vantage point on Iranian culture in the twentieth century, untainted by stereotypes artificially imposed by the Western mainstream media. Ward focuses on the Iranian people in his review, asserting that Iranians — not unlike Westerners — are compassionate and humorous. In this capacity, by emphasizing the commonalities between Iranians and Westerners, Ward implicitly suggests that Satrapi's memoir rejects a Manichean outlook on American-Iranian relations.

Just as reviews written by critics both conform to and reject the Manichean discourse, so too do the consumer reviews written on Amazon.com. An excerpt from the “Most Helpful” customer review for *Persepolis* reads: “Persepolis is the story of one girls [*sic*] experience during the fall of the Shah of Iran, the ensuing Islamic Revolution (which included Stalin like ‘purges’), and war with Iraq.”<sup>122</sup> The reviewer's interpretation of the Iranian Revolution appears to have been heavily influenced by the Western media. The reference to Stalin would undoubtedly resonate with most Americans, as Stalin represented a fundamental figure in World War II and, as such, was likely a staple of many Americans' high school history courses. Stalin also functions as an iconic symbol of communism. Communism, of course, was perceived as a threat to the American values of liberty and democracy in the early-to-mid twentieth century and was regarded as fundamentally “evil.” By comparing Stalin's “purges” to the Islamic Revolution, the reviewer plays upon the American consumer's preexisting feelings of distrust and suspicion towards Stalin and communism, redirecting them towards Iran. In this capacity, the review leads even those readers unfamiliar with Iran's history and politics to implicitly distrust the nation and regard it as “evil.”

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Christian Hunter, “Heartwarming insight. As rich in art as it is in history,” [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/review/R1EF4EBYQAJ7YC/ref=cm_cr_pr_viewpnt#R1EF4EBYQAJ7YC) 8 March 2005  
<[http://www.amazon.com/review/R1EF4EBYQAJ7YC/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_viewpnt#R1EF4EBYQAJ7YC](http://www.amazon.com/review/R1EF4EBYQAJ7YC/ref=cm_cr_pr_viewpnt#R1EF4EBYQAJ7YC)>.

Still, other American readers approach the book with a less-politically charged mindset. One review entitled “The Iranians as People, Not Evil,” states:

I have read other books, such as *Persian Mirrors*, which give the reader a clear sense of Iran’s history. But until reading this book, I had yet to find material which showed Iranians’ sensitivity, kindness and love of family, feasts and the finest things in life. Satrapi’s book reminds us to be compassionate at a time when fear & anger easily eclipses [*sic*] our best intentions.<sup>123</sup>

Here, the reviewer explicitly notes that *Persepolis* provides readers with a humane depiction of the Iranian people that moves beyond a reductive portrayal of Iran as “bad.” Interestingly, this particular review, though one of the “Most Helpful” on Amazon.com, was significantly less popular than the aforementioned review which conformed to Manichean discourse. 158 consumers voted that they found the first review helpful, while only five consumers voted for the second.

In a lecture at Oberlin College in 2005, Satrapi stated, “The moment [Iranians and Westerners] can laugh together is the moment we can understand each other. Once we understand each other, we cannot make war with one another.”<sup>124</sup> Satrapi’s statement and her memoir have the potential to promote an open dialogue between people. Although *Persepolis* attempts to reveal the underlying similarities between Iran and the West, reviews of the memoir show persistent adherence to the stereotypes and prejudices sadly engrained in Western culture.

### **III. The Manifestations of Orientalist Language in Reviews for *Journey from the Land of No and Even After All This Time***

When readers open Roya Hakakian’s memoir, *Journey from the Land of No*, they are confronted with a number of reviews, many of which address the author’s prose or the heroism of her story. Two reviews, however, play directly into the perception of Iran as an inherently “bad” nation.

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<sup>123</sup> “A Customer,” “The Iranians as People, Not Evil,” [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/review/RW0QC4YR4VFK5P/ref=cm_srch_res_rtr_alt_1) 26 September 2003 <[http://www.amazon.com/review/RW0QC4YR4VFK5P/ref=cm\\_srch\\_res\\_rtr\\_alt\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/review/RW0QC4YR4VFK5P/ref=cm_srch_res_rtr_alt_1)>.

<sup>124</sup> Erica Tempesta, “Convocation continues with [Persepolis](#) author. Satrapi discusses graphic bio,” [The Oberlin Review](http://www.oberlin.edu/stupub/ocreview/2005/10/14/arts/article1.html) 14 October 2005 <<http://www.oberlin.edu/stupub/ocreview/2005/10/14/arts/article1.html>>.

These reviews compare Hakakian's story of growing up as a Jew in revolutionary Iran to the experiences of Jews in Nazi Germany:

Hakakian, irrepressible, brave, and strong-willed, watches in dismay as the country she loves disappears, to be replaced by one that views what Roya most values — an insatiable intellect — with profound contempt. Like Anne Frank, she is a perceptive, idealistic, terribly sympathetic chronicler of the gathering repression.

— *Baltimore Sun*

Political upheavals like the fall of the Shah of Iran and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism may be analyzed endlessly by scholars, but eyewitness accounts like Hakakian's help us understand what it was like to experience such a revolution firsthand... Her story, reminiscent of Jews in Nazi Germany, is haunting.

— *Publishers Weekly*<sup>125</sup>

The comparison these reviewers have drawn between Hakakian's experience and those of the Jews in Nazi Germany is not only unjustified, it is also somewhat exploitative. In her memoir, Hakakian does not associate her experience growing up in revolutionary Iran with Nazi Germany, nor does she ever compare herself to Anne Frank. The word "Nazi" is used only once in the memoir; when a swastika is scribbled on the Hakakian home, Roya's father describes the sign as "Something from the Nazi days."<sup>126</sup> Still, the harassment that the Hakakian family personally underwent, though troubling, was not nearly as atrocious as the persecution that many Jews experienced in Nazi Germany. By suggesting that Hakakian's story is reminiscent of the Holocaust, these critics artificially create a condemnatory link between Iran and Nazi Germany.

In contrast to these reductive analyses, several Amazon.com reviews for *Journey from the Land of No* applaud the book for providing a more complex outlook on Iran. One consumer wrote,

Often articles and books written about the 1979 revolution in Iran are partial. Most are written by people who claim to have foreseen the catastrophic consequences of the revolution and never supported it. Few writers are bold and introspective enough to acknowledge their excitement about the possibility of a democratic change at the time, followed by sobering disenchantment during the immediate post-revolutionary years.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Hakakian i, iv.

<sup>126</sup> Hakakian 135.

<sup>127</sup> "Cyrus Cyrus," *Journey from the Land of No*, [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-) (April 4, 2005)  
<<http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member->

In this review, the author notes that Hakakian provides a refreshing analysis of the Revolution that resists the misconception that the Revolution was supported solely by Islamic extremists. Indeed, in her memoir, Hakakian writes, “1979 was not only a year, but also a love affair, the most alluring love of our lives.”<sup>128</sup> This reviewer’s interpretation of the text appears to align quite seamlessly with Hakakian’s expressed intent for writing the memoir. In an interview with me, Hakakian stated,

It was the tension between what I knew and had witnessed and what was predominant in the American society as the true views of Iran that... compelled me to write. The dominant account of the Iranian Revolution was a skewed account and somehow I needed to find a way of balancing and correcting that... It is my hope that I can provide a more nuanced and complex picture of Iran.<sup>129</sup>

By focusing her memoir on her family and their hopes and dreams both for Iran and for themselves, the author provides a new, humanizing vantage point through which to view the Revolution.

While a number of reviews succumbing to Manichean discourse exist for *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Persepolis*, and *Journey From the Land of No*, there are few reviews of this nature for Afshineh Latifi’s memoir, *Even After All This Time*. In fact, hardly any formal critical reviews for the memoir are featured on the publisher’s website or in the print edition of the book itself. The back cover features four reviews that are each no longer than a sentence. The review from *Publishers Weekly* reads: “Wonderful...a remarkable, resonating tale,” while an excerpt from a review in *Library Journal* simply reads, “Hard to put down.” The only review that gives some semblance of an analysis of the memoir notes that the story provides a “compelling testament to the dauntless nature of the human spirit.”<sup>130</sup> This review from *Booklist* suggests that the narrator perseveres through

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reviews/A1D6H04VX8I5T8/ref=cm\_pdp\_rev\_more?ie=UTF8&sort\_by=MostRecentReview#R16NLX80E2EK7Z>.

<sup>128</sup> Hakakian 8.

<sup>129</sup> Hakakian, Personal Interview, Skype, 8 January 2013.

<sup>130</sup> “[A] compelling testament to the dauntless nature of the human spirit,” *Booklist*, *Even After All This Time*.

hardship; and that this hardship, given that the book's subtitle is *A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran*, is inextricably linked to the Islamic Revolution.

In spite of the dearth of formal critical assessments of Latifi's memoir, there exist many reviews on Amazon.com, several of which, perhaps expectedly, conform to the "good" versus "evil" binary. Nearly all of the consumers who write within this framework argue that Latifi's story would have been more interesting had it been told from the perspective of her parents. The "Most Helpful" review on Amazon.com states,

As others mentioned, the real heroes of this story are Afschineh Latifi's mother and father. Even though he knew his fate, her father had supreme courage standing up to the maniacs who would put him to death. Her mother suffered the loss of her husband silently and sacrificed in order to save her children from the madness that took over their country. If Latifi would have concentrated on the lives of her parents this would be a different but much better story.<sup>131</sup>

The reviewer rightfully regards Latifi's parents as innocent victims of the Revolution. Still, the use of such charged-language as "maniacs" and "madness" perpetuate a sensationalized image of Iran as a nation populated by crazed, demonic and, indeed, bloodthirsty individuals. Once again, a binary is established; though the "good," here, may refer to Latifi's parents, the "evil," once again, is firmly associated with Iran. The popularity of this particular review among Amazon.com reviewers further suggests that this idea is shared by many American readers.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

In her article, "Fake Farsi: Formulaic Flexibility in Iranian-American Women's Memoir," scholar Babak Elahi writes, "While North American journalism and media today are somewhat more sophisticated in their reading of Iran than they were in the 1980s, Edward Said's critique of media

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<sup>131</sup> Caesar M. Warrington, "A Million Died and Over Clothes She'd Cried," [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) 24 January 2006  
<[http://www.amazon.com/review/R3MJ71KZUB0NUQ/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B005Q8H158&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=283155&store=books](http://www.amazon.com/review/R3MJ71KZUB0NUQ/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B005Q8H158&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=283155&store=books)>.

coverage of Iran in that period still rings true twenty years later.”<sup>132</sup> Borrowing ideas from Said in his 1981 text, *Covering Islam*, Elahi notes, “Iran remains ‘really no more than a poorly defined and badly misunderstood abstraction’”<sup>133</sup> Elahi adds, “This is true despite, or even because of, the representation of the yearnings of young people and women in more recent coverage.”<sup>134</sup> Although many consumers purchase *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Persepolis*, *Journey From the Land of No*, and *Even After All This Time* with the desire to learn more about Iranian culture, readers often discuss Iran and its relationship to the United States in shockingly reductive terms, perhaps imbuing their reading with preexisting biases and prejudices. As an extension of these biased readings, most critical analyses of the memoirs, be they formal or informal, ultimately revert to the same base conclusion: Iran is “evil” and the West is “good.”

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<sup>132</sup> Babak Elahi, “Fake Farsi: Formulaic Flexibility in Iranian American Women’s Memoir,” MELUS 33.2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Summer 2008): 43.

<sup>133</sup> Edward W. Said, Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World (New York: Vintage, 1997): 83.

<sup>134</sup> Elahi 43.

## Conclusion

Scholars often discuss the recent influx of memoirs written by Middle Eastern authors in exile after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. In particular, they cite the popularity of Iranian women's memoirs, including those that have been discussed over the course of this thesis, as a welcome addition to the literary landscape. The emergence of these memoirs is the direct result of an increasingly tense, anxiety-ridden political environment in which Americans sought to learn more about the Middle East and its people.

In this thesis, I have carefully analyzed the memoirs *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, by Azar Nafisi (2003); *Persepolis 1* and *2*, by Marjane Satrapi (2003, 2004); *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*, by Roya Hakakian (2004); and *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran*, by Afschineh Latifi and ghostwriter Pablo F. Fenjves (2005). In addition, I have also attempted to provide a thorough overview of the social, political, and cultural environment in Iran and in the United States, both during the time of the Iranian Revolution and in the post-9/11 world in which these texts were released. My analyses ultimately prove that both the American publishing industry and American consumers approached these memoirs with particular expectations regarding Iranian culture and history, and the ways in which Iranian women “should” look and act. The expectations — and, often, misconceptions — were largely shaped by the Western media's representations of the Middle East following the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks.

These memoirs present a rare and unique opportunity to promote understanding between the United States and Iran. In spite of this, more recent artistic depictions of the Islamic Revolution have completely overshadowed the non-ethnocentric dialogue that these memoirs sought to promote. Perhaps the most widely publicized example of this is the 2012 Warner Brothers' film, *Argo*. Though the recipient of countless awards and accolades, the film has been harshly criticized for its demonizing portrayal of Iranians. The film tells the story of a covert Canadian-CIA operation

intended to remove six Americans from Iran in 1979, during the explosive Iran Hostage Crisis. Throughout the movie, fear-mongering Iranian revolutionaries swarm the streets in protest, merchants in Tehran glare menacingly at Americans, and radical Islamic students profess their hatred towards the United States on loudspeakers. Conveniently, the only Iranian character portrayed humanely in the film is a young woman who provides aid to the Americans, lying about their presence in the home of a Canadian ambassador living in Tehran when revolutionary guards question her. At this year's Academy Awards, the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, accompanied by military personnel, presented the film's producers with the highly coveted award for Best Picture. Mrs. Obama's involvement in the Oscar broadcast was both unexpected and highly symbolic, representing the union between art and politics. More importantly, though, by presenting the *Argo* filmmakers with this award, Mrs. Obama conveyed not only the American cinema's, but also the American government's appraisal of the film and, by extension, its malicious depiction of Iran.

*Argo* is not the only major motion picture to portray Iran as a nation comprised of extremists. Three decades ago, Betty Mahmoody's biography *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) notoriously portrayed Iran as misogynistic and fundamentalist, inciting cries of "Iranophobia" within Hollywood. In light of these disturbingly negative portrayals of Iran, the question then becomes: how do we reconcile the incendiary and demonic depiction of revolutionary Iran promoted in works like *Argo* with the more nuanced and balanced interpretations of the Revolution provided by these memoirs? In spite of (or, given our inherent interest in controversy, because of) Ben Affleck's portrayal of white Americans victimized in hostile Iran, these memoirs continue to enjoy relative popularity in the United States. If Americans are able to look past the reductive marketing campaigns of these memoirs and the Western media's Orientalist views on Iran, perhaps these women's stories can help to combat the negative stereotypes that *Argo* perpetuates. As Roya Hakakian stated in our interview:

Part of this whole effort [of writing memoirs] is trying to reach American audiences and informing Western viewers. [We are] really resisting tyranny by not allowing the account the conquerors are providing to be the only one. Part of the byproduct of this process of writing is a conversation with Western readers; the other is to also make sure the history of the Roya Hakakians of Iran is not erased.

Hakakian's efforts — and, certainly those of Nafisi, Satrapi, and Latifi — to rewrite and ultimately reclaim their history is noble and profound in its implications. As a Middle Eastern-American female myself, I hope to contribute to this trend. My hope is for this thesis to be regarded not only as a culmination of political, cultural, and literary analyses surrounding the memoirs of these four women, but also as an attempt to create a medium (though limited in its scope) through which the voices of Iranian women may be heard and appreciated.

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