

Review Essay

Written for the West: Reading Three Iranian Women's Memoirs

The burgeoning canon of memoirs and fiction written by or about Iranian women has saturated the literary scene of post-9/11 America. We have seen literary works translated or mostly written by exiles that entice the curious western reader with Orientalist tales of Muslim women as veiled, unveiling, powerless victims, or brave escapees of an inherently oppressive patriarchy. The titles and contents of many of these works show that appealing to a specific political climate and power structure is a key factor behind their production, dissemination, and consumption. Therefore, despite this literary boom, it is not certain whether these books add anything to our knowledge of Muslims or if, in fact, they actually obfuscate it.

I read several such memoirs while drawing up the required reading lists for the undergraduate courses that I teach at an American liberal arts college. Working under the assumption that exposure to literary self-representation is an effective way of familiarizing students with contemporary Muslim women's lives, I eventually chose three books written in English by three contemporary Iranian women specifically for western audiences. In its own particular way, each one addresses gender and the experiences of women in Muslim societies: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Random House: 2003), Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (University of North Carolina Press: 2007), and Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening: A Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country* (Random House: 2007).

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After resigning her faculty position at a Tehran university in 1995, Nafisi gathered together seven of her best female students for a weekly study of western literature in her home. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* chronicles their reading of western novels blended with the observations and discussions of the students' personal sorrows and joys. The book is structured around four parts: "Lolita," "Gatsby," "James," and "Austin." We are told in the first part's opening page that if Nafisi were to choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with women's lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would be *Lolita*. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955 and 1967) is a tale of sexual obsession and the subsequent affair of Humbert Humbert, a literature scholar, with Lolita, his widowed landlady's twelve-year-old daughter. It is hard to miss Nafisi's working assumption (even though she has denied this in her interviews) that exposure to the works of such western novelists as Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Austin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Henry James enables Iranian women to assert their agency and counter Islamist dictatorship. To recognize all literary allusions in Nafisi's memoir, however, requires a prior knowledge of western literature. In fact, students in my "Islam and Women" class found the laborious literary criticism passages a drawback.

Nafisi critiques totalitarianism through the liberating power of literature and offers several interesting insights. For example, just as the real Lolita is unknown except through Humbert, the narrator, the lives of Iran's women are subsumed under the desire of those who appropriate them (pp. 36-37). She writes: "The desperate truth of Lolita's story is not the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual's life by another*" (p. 33 [emphasis in the original]). In more than one passage, Nafisi hints at the uncanny similarities between the mechanisms of domination and control employed by Humbert, the much older seducer who exonerates himself by implicating his victims, and Ayatollah Khomeini, who erased the lived experiences of women by turning them into figments of his imagination (pp. 25, 42, 43, and 50). Through his portrayal of Humbert, Nafisi notes in a moment of sudden inspiration, that Nabokov is, in fact, taking revenge against anyone who has tried to shape others according to their own fantasies and desires.

Nafisi's dearth of resources becomes apparent when she states that even though these girls wanted so much more from life than they had been given, "there was nothing in reality" that she could offer them (p. 32). Her advice, consequently, pointed to the possibility of "another world," one beyond a life of consistent brutality in which heroes and heroines are saved from utter despair. This world, she maintains, is "only attainable through fiction" (p. 32).

It is understandable that Nafisi, as a scholar of western literature, grounds her advice to her “girls,” as she affectionately calls them, in western novels. The problem, however, arises when Iran is portrayed as a static anti-modern violent nation in perpetual conflict with western democracy and individual liberty. The charge of being a “native informer” against Nafisi is not quite accurate, for aside from the recycled stereotypes that conceal the local culture’s complexity and richness, there is little in-depth information about Iran or its people here. The book ultimately upholds the structure of the West’s colonializing power and perpetuates notions of a barbaric–sexualized Muslim “Orient” (e.g., pp. 210-12).

Fatemeh Keshavarz’s *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* is written with two specific goals in mind: to interrogate what she calls the “New Orientalist” narrative by offering an in-depth critical understanding of this “eye-witness” literature (such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*) and to provide an alternative approach for learning about an unfamiliar culture (p. 2). New Orientalism, like the Orientalism of old, she writes, simplifies its subject’s complexity and richness and maintains the West’s narrative of comprehensive superiority and hegemony against the natives’ inferiority. The emerging New Orientalism, however, employs native or semi-native informers and is cast in the insider’s voice (p. 3). Keshavarz reveals that she chose *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as an example of New Orientalism not only because it is one of the twenty-first century’s best-selling titles, but also because of the little-known furious debate it has caused among American Muslims in general and Iranian Americans in particular (p. 6).

Many of these Iranians do not recognize Nafisi’s distorted and exaggerated account of life in post-revolutionary Iran that ultimately makes Iranians appear to be subhuman. One such example is found on page 25 of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: “We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent – namely ideology.” One cannot help but wonder if there could actually be any culture in a world that “denies merit to literary works.” Keshavarz sums up the flaw in this statement when she points out that Nafisi’s Iran is one in which “cinemas had been burnt, professors expelled students who disagreed with them, uncles who considered themselves ‘pure and chaste’ Muslims molested their nieces, and every twelve-year-old girl was ‘considered long ripe for marriage’” (p. 19). She successfully portrays a culture that did more than value the world of literature; it “lived it” through the ups and downs of life (*Jasmine and Stars*, 28-29).

Unfortunately, Nafisi omits the lively and controversial literature created in Iran in the years prior to, during, and after the revolution. For example Forough Farrokhzad (d. 1967), a very influential poetess of pre-revolutionary Iran known for her bold and imaginative poetry, is never mentioned. Keshavarz dedicates one chapter to “The Eternal Forough: The Voice of Our Earthly Rebellion.” We read about her vivid memory of hearing the news of Forough’s untimely death from her physics teacher as a ninth-grader. Even though this poetess continues to influence the Iranian literary scene to this day – almost every month a new edition of her poetry is printed in Iran – yet she is conspicuously absent in Nafisi’s account, which celebrates the power of literature. Keshavarz’s analogy of touching an elephant in the dark is a good description of the *Reading Lolita in Tehran* type of memoir writing. This analogy, borrowed from the great Persian mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1278) consists of a group of people who have never known an elephant trying to explain it after touching parts of it in the dark: a thick column (for those who touched its foot), a drain pipe (for those who touched its trunk), and so on. “A lack of specificity,” she writes, “turns *RLT* into a dark house where the reader has little choice but to feel his or her way around the elephant that is post-revolutionary Iran” (p. 37).

Jasmine and Stars ultimately transcends its quarrel with *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and offers its own rich and complex account of lives blended with religion and culture, “painstakingly weav[ing] a multihued tapestry of human voices and experiences” (p. 5). Instead of the cold fathers, cruel brothers, and abusing uncles with whom we are presented in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, here we have a beautiful portrayal of a gentle uncle who, despite his high army rank, possesses a passion for Persian miniature paintings rooted unambiguously in religion (p. 63), as well as an ethical vision that would read gender equality in the Qur’anic story of the creation of Adam and Eve and accept that the Baha’is, considered by some as heretics, are entitled to all of the good that may come from the love of a universal God (pp. 65 and 66).

Keshavarz notes that her uncle’s openness was not an exception, but rather the continuation of a norm extending far back into Iran’s literary and cultural history, one that is nourished by such towering mystical figures as Rumi and Attar. Nafisi also acknowledges Rumi’s and Attar’s “joy in the power of language to delight and astonish” (*Reading Lolita*, p. 172). But for her, these classical literary masterpieces belong to an inaccessibly distant past. This is New Orientalism’s sinister side for, as Keshavarz relates, this

attitude not only conceals the complexity of natives' lives, but also boosts the extremist stance by viewing all good things in the Muslim Middle East as belonging to an ambivalently glorified past (pp. 70-71).

The contrast between Nafisi's book and Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening* confronts the reader in their telling opening pages. Whereas the former begins with a quote from Czeslaw Milosz, a poet and writer of Polish origin, the latter begins with two quotations: one from Jalal al-Din Rumi and one from the Qur'an. Milosz's quote reads:

To whom do we tell what happened on the
Earth, for whom do we place everywhere huge
Mirrors in the hope that they will be filled up
And will stay so?

Ebadi quotes Rumi:

Sadness to me is the happiest time
When a shining city rises from the ruins of my drunken mind
Those times when I'm silent and still as the earth,
The thunder of my roar is heard across the universe.

She goes on to quote chapter 103 of the Qur'an:

I swear by the declining day, that perdition shall be the lot of humanity, except for those who have faith and do good works and exhort each other to justice and fortitude.

These two contrasting openings are indicative of where each author locates herself. Ebadi's opening pages are very significant because, in her context, putting Rumi above the Qur'an alludes to several simultaneous points. First, this privileges a mystical interpretation of Islam above a direct recourse to the Qur'an. To explain this further, it should be remembered that the significance and authority of Rumi's poetry is considered to be second only to that of the Qur'an. In fact his *magnum opus*, the *Mathnavi*, is called the "Persian Qur'an." By quoting Persian mystical poetry in her book's opening pages and throughout its remaining 236 pages, Ebadi is, in effect, circumventing the clergy's self-authorized monopoly over the means of accessing and producing religious knowledge.

This is repeated when she speaks of her childhood "mystical experience," when she prayed privately to God to keep her perpetually sick mother alive:

Suddenly, an indescribable feeling overtook me, starting in my stomach and spreading to my fingertips. In that stirring, I felt as though God was answering me. My sadness evaporated, and a strange euphoria shot through my heart. Since that moment, my faith in God has been unshakeable. (p. 10)

This unshakeable faith in God, as well as her upbringing in an un-patriarchal household that did not privilege male children (pp. 11-12), shaped Ebadi's life throughout her career as a judge in pre-revolutionary Iran and the decades of Islamic rule.

In *Iran Awakening*, we follow Ebadi through her girlhood in Tehran and her early professional success as Iran's most accomplished female jurist in the days of the Shah's regime. She notes that despite the Shah's corruption and oppressive rule, she did not see a contradiction in joining the justice system, because despite the so-called military "courts" that prosecuted political cases, people still trusted the legal system to protect their basic rights. Ebadi explains that she initially did not see any contradiction between being an educated professional woman and supporting Ayatollah Khomeini, because "faith occupied a central role" in the lives of middle-class Iranians. Such people had more in common with an opposition led by the mullahs, who spoke the familiar language of ordinary Iranians, than with the "gilded court of the Shah, whose officials cavorted with American starlets at parties soaked in expensive French champagne" (p. 33).

This initial attraction did not last too long: the first public acts of the new regime that directly affected Ebadi were the restriction of women in public space, the imposition of the hijab, and a strict interpretation of Islamic penal law. As a result of her defiance, she was demoted and eventually forced into early retirement. In 1992, however, the Iranian judiciary relented and permitted women to begin practicing law.

An important aspect that distinguishes her memoir from Nafisi's is its astute political observation. Chapter 1, "A Tehran Girlhood," begins with an early childhood memory: the day a CIA-orchestrated coup overthrew the democratically elected nationalist Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and returned the Shah to power (1953). She describes the sense of profound humiliation felt by Iranians "who watched the United States intervene in their politics as if their country were some annexed backwater, its leader to be installed or deposed at the whim of an American president and his CIA advisers" (p. 5) and highlights a fact well-known among Iranians: the 1979 Iranian revolution and the ensuing American hostage crisis were direct results of the CIA coup (pp. 47-48). To this she adds the West's full support for Saddam Hussein during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (pp. 61, 77, and 92).

Ebadi does not hold anything back from her honest criticism of misguided American foreign policies or President George W. Bush's words and promises of freedom and democracy that contravene the actions of his administration (e.g., pp. 92 and 213). She draws parallels between censorship under Iran's Islamic regime and the United States when she writes of the publication ban on her memoir due to the Treasury Department's regulations against publishing works by citizens of embargoed nations, such as Iran (pp. 210-13). Although Ebadi challenged this regulation through legal action, she laments the unnecessary stumbling blocks that hinder the intellectual exchange between the two nations, for which she is a vocal advocate.

Ebadi explains how women were paradoxically more active in the public arena after the revolution than before, even though this did not translate into equal rights (pp. 104 and 106): "The Islamic Republic had inadvertently championed traditional women, yet it has also left them ruthlessly vulnerable, for they had been given a new awareness of their rights but only crude tools with which to advance them" (p. 109). She takes the reader through her personal experiences of the eight-year war with Iraq, the mass executions of political prisoners that followed (p. 90), and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. In addition, she recounts her personal experiences and those of other women who resisted the oppressive pro-government paramilitary security forces after the war ended.

As a lawyer directly involved in many of the cases dealing with the Ministry of Intelligence's extra-judiciary assassinations of Iranian journalists and activists during the 1990s, chapter 8 is useful for scholars interested in eye-witness accounts of that time's climate of terror. Chapter 9 explains an "experiment in hope" (p. 142), referring to the relatively open years of liberal-minded President Khatami (1997-2005). During this period, immature glimmers of hope for civil society were crushed by newspaper closures that culminated in student protests and riots. Ebadi found herself in prison for taking on the case of a student killed by the security forces during these protests. Her prison experience makes for an interesting read (chapter 10).

What sharply distinguishes Ebadi's work from Nafisi's is that despite experiencing a narrow, oppressive, and violent Islamic regime, she views Islam, human rights, and equal rights for women as compatible with each other (p. 192). In other words, the problem is not with Islam, but rather with a specifically self-authorizing and self-serving interpretation of Islam. For example, she convincingly argues that imposing the veil was more about creating a climate of fear than of observing an Islamic precept (p. 103).

Interestingly, the solution she advocates is a full separation of religion and politics (pp. 122 and 192).

Reading women's memoirs does not automatically contribute to better pedagogies, just as exposure to western literature does not naturally liberate Iranian women from patriarchal dictatorship. Iranian women's memoirs are produced in a specific historical context, and the act of teaching/reading them takes place in a specific historical moment that is inseparable from the prevailing power structures. What else could explain the enthusiastic reception and reviews that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* received? After all, it sold almost a million copies and remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for seventy weeks. These three authors set out to interrogate these power structures.

The reading and teaching of transnational women's literature is most productive when space for moral reflection is created and sustained through critically historicizing the ethics of writing, disseminating, and reading.¹ These three memoirs may well be read together, for Ebadi and Keshavarz insist on a more nuanced and realistic reading of Iranian women's lived experiences than Nafisi offers. However, a better pedagogical approach would be to have the reading of these three memoirs accompany (or better yet, proceed from) a consciousness of their historicity. Most importantly, these memoirs cannot be abstracted from the historical moment and site in which they are consumed.

Endnote

1. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Lisa K. Taylor, "Reading Desire: From Empathy to Estrangement, from Enlightenment to Implication," *Intercultural Education* 18, no. 8 (2007): 297-316. I am thankful to Jasmin Zine for bringing this article to my attention.