

Self-orientalisation and reorientation: a glimpse at Iranian Muslim women's memoirs

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Abstract

For centuries people from the East and West have been interested in understanding each other's cultures and way of life. Gender dichotomy in the Middle East and the historical exclusion of female members of society from the public sphere have shrouded Middle Eastern women's lives in mystery for those in the West. Often orientalist tales emerging from the Middle East portray the Middle Eastern Muslim woman as silent, and an abused victim of the patriarchal culture. Those in the West have dreamed of unveiling and demystifying her existence. However, over the last several decades, particularly in the last ten years following 9/11, there has been an influx of narratives by Middle Eastern women themselves that promise to unravel and unveil the lives of Middle Eastern women. Among them, Muslim women of Arab, African and Iranian backgrounds have published hundreds of books recounting various aspects of their lives in the Middle East. Yet many of these narratives, despite aspiring to become a platform for the voices of Middle Eastern women, appear to be involved in further self-orientalisation. While the covers of many of these books, with the veiled woman peering out at the audience, invite the western reader to free her from her oppression by reading her tale, the content of these books confirm what the western reader already assumes about the oppression of Muslim women in the Middle East.

In this paper I consider the socio-political and historical context into which Middle Eastern women's narratives are appearing. Taking Iranian women's memoirs as an example, and considering the socio-political background of some of the authors, I examine the reasons

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why their narratives, despite claiming to be a platform to free them from orientalist stereotypes, are in fact leading to further self-reorientalisation.

Historically, people in the East and the West have always been interested in understanding each other's culture and way of life. Gender issues, particularly gender dichotomy in the Middle East, have shrouded Middle Eastern women's lives in mystery for the West. Many in the West have been fascinated by Middle Eastern women's situation. Yet these veiled women have mostly remained and continue to remain an enigma. Consequently, this has led to overexaggeration of the situation of Muslim women, and over centuries many have constructed the assumption that 'veiled women were necessarily more oppressed, more passive, more ignorant than unveiled women', leading to 'exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in "the Orient"' (Mabro 1991: 3).

Such gross exaggerations, however, can historically and partially be blamed on the position of Muslim women themselves, and their vehement absence as individuals with their own voice in the western world. Until recently Muslim women, particularly those in the Middle East, did not have the social and educational means to express themselves beyond the borders of their own countries. It has only been recently, as the result of revolutions, wars and disruptions in the region, and mass migrations from the Middle East to other countries, that some Middle Eastern women have, to a certain degree, gained the opportunity to narrate their own stories. Adding to their ability to express themselves has also been the conflict in and interest in the region. That is why over the last several decades, particularly since 9/11, there has been an influx of popular narratives in the West by Middle Eastern women, which promise to unravel the situation and unveil their life in their own voice in the West. Many of these accounts, as I examine elsewhere,² are a response to the author's emotional experiences and act as healing devices for those who faced traumas of war, revolution and migration, forming sites for the reconstruction of their sense of identity. However, the production, reception and consumption of these books are also highly influenced by the socio-political and historical context of the author's home country, as well as that of the host country, to the point that sometimes,

2 I discuss this issue at length in my PhD thesis, *Ways of being, lines of becoming: a study of post-revolutionary diasporic Iranian writing*, completed at the University of New South Wales in 2012.

despite aspiring to become a platform for the voices of women, they appear to be involved in further self-orientalisation. In this paper I take diasporic Iranian women's memoirs as an example of how such narratives can be read as a kind of self-orientalisation.

Iranian women's memoirs have emerged in the English-speaking West in two waves. The first of the memoirs appeared immediately after the 1979 revolution, after the mass migrations of Iranians from Iran. The appearance and interest in these books not coincidentally coincided with western fascination with Iran, after the overthrow of the Shah and his replacement by the seemingly violent and fanatic Islamic regime, and after the dramatic American hostage crisis in Iran. At a time when Iranian borders were closed, and when restrictive Islamic laws forced women into veiling, any account that shed light, particularly on women's situation, became of interest for western readers. The second wave of Iranian women's memoirs appeared after 9/11 in light of Iran's renewed conflict with the West, and the increasing human rights issues affecting Iranian citizens. Consequently, over the last three and half decades Iranian women have published nearly sixty memoirs.

While the first wave of memoirs was published by women who had recently experienced migration, the second wave has been mostly delayed narratives of the revolution, often told by women who migrated as children or as young adults, and who have now, after years, had a chance to contemplate their own stories and lives. For this reason, many of these narratives are accounts that act as a kind of therapy and offer closure for those who have had to struggle with various traumas in both Iran and abroad.

At the same time, these memoirs have also been particularly appealing for western readers, particularly Americans, because, as Gillian Whitlock observed, they 'attract American readers again now, and ... revisit and fold the events of the Islamic revolution and its aftermath into the present one more time' (2007: 163). Emerging at the height of tensions between Iran and America, these narratives were received by 'the curious and uninformed American readership eager to know about Iran and primed for the stories of disenchantment by exiles' (p 65). Received in this kind of socio-political environment, and aimed at a readership with specific

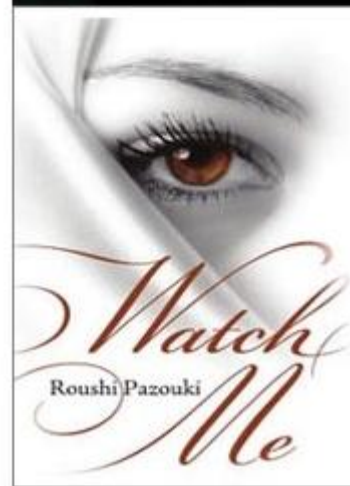
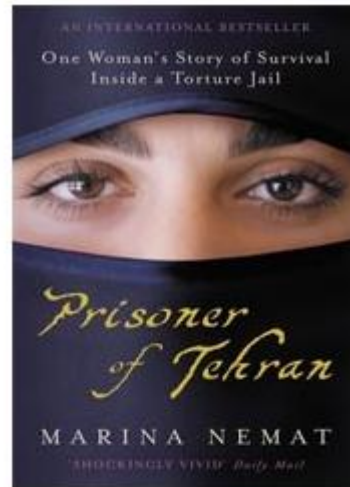
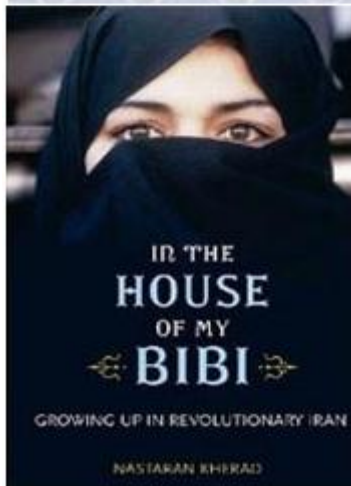
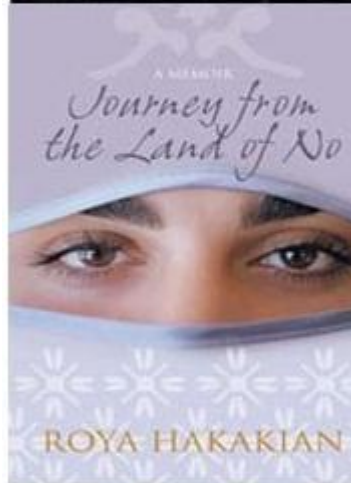
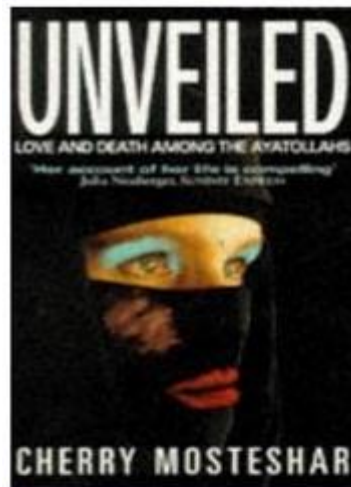
expectations, often the production of these books also conveys and adheres to certain conventions expected of Middle Eastern women's narratives. Titles and covers, blurbs and promotions for these books often draw on notions of silence, veiling and unveiling, oppression and imprisonment, highlighting the acute difference between women's lives over 'there' and here. In fact so frequently have Iranian women's memoirs been presented and published within a certain kind of prescribed framework that this has created what Catherine Burwell called 'particular *modes* of reading' (2007: 288).

Such modes of readings become clear as soon as we glance at some of the covers of books published by Iranian women. Of all the Iranian women's memoirs over the past several decades, more than half are presented with a similar cover image of a sole woman with some sort of a veil. In some the women are bare headed and have the veil hanging around their necks; in others, they are shadowy and distant figures wearing an enclosing black Iranian-style veil called a chador. But the covers most commonly feature a woman's half-veiled face, only her eyes showing, piercing and staring at the audience. The veiled women, with only their eyes peering out at the viewers, as in the covers of *Unveiled* (1995), *Prisoner of Tehran* (2008), *Journey from the land of no* (2004), *Rage against the veil* (1999), *In the house of my Bibi* (2008), and *Watch me* (2010), are inviting and yet challenging the viewer/reader to pick up the book to enter into their mysterious, hidden world. The eyes in these images, sharp in focus, distinguish each woman from the other under the veil, a humanising strategy suggesting that the woman behind the veil 'can look back at the spectator mute but eloquent' (Whitlock 2007: 59). However, what is interesting to note is that, despite this humanising strategy, there is a sense of generalisation, a kind of 'one woman's story is every woman's story' approach. If we look, for instance, at the covers of *Journey from the land of no* and *Prisoner of Tehran* the same set of eyes is peering back at us, hinting at the similarity of these two narratives. All of these images, despite their slight variations, tap 'into a [western] fantasy of the illicit penetration of the hidden and gendered spaces of the "Islamic World"' (2007: 58). They are 'invit[ing] and encourag[ing] the Western imperial gaze, offering Westerners a glimpse into the presumably forbidden world beneath the veil' (Whitlock 2008: 81).



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This invitation is almost a call for acknowledgement by the western reader, an appeal for recognition, from women who have so far been silenced in their own country. However, the

fact that the western reader is involved in this act of unveiling and recognition operates on an acceptance of cultural dichotomy between the narrator and the reader, appealing, as Whitlock also reminds us, to the western tradition of benevolence. It is only by the book being picked up by the western reader that Iranian women can be recognised and thereby regain their sense of subjectivity. This recognition, however, operates on a presumption that Iranian women are oppressed, and imprisoned behind the veil, and that they need western readers/values to liberate them from their social imprisonment.

The titles too, add layers to and heighten these elements. Titles like *Unveiled: life and death among the Ayatollahs*, *Out of Iran: one woman's escape from the Ayatollahs*, *In the house of my Bibi: growing up in revolutionary Iran*, *Honeymoon in Tehran: two years of love and danger in Iran*, and *Rage against the veil: the courageous life and death of an Islamic dissident* draw on the urgency of life, death and revolution, and debated issues of the veil and unveiling. They feed into orientalist perspectives and are, as Whitlock argued, 'designed to grab the Western eye with a glimpse of absolute difference, of the exotic' (2007: 59). At a time of America's 'war on terror', and Iran's presence in the axis of evil, these titles feed into this discourse and are 'a way of positioning them for metropolitan markets' (p 59).

However, while titles and covers are often constructed by publishers as selling points, sometimes with authors themselves having little control over them, it is not only the covers and titles that conform to a kind of orientalist vision. Interestingly enough, the content of some of these books, too, reaffirms the position of Iranian women as oppressed and lacking freedom. The question that arises is why are Iranian women, who claim to be the voices of oppressed women, describing Iranian women within predefined discursive spaces?

While this can be partially explained by the publishing industry's marketing strategies, the reason for the description of Iranian women within certain frameworks in the content of these books can be explained in relation to the socio-historical and cultural background of some of the memoirists themselves. Indeed, the origin of this kind of representation has historical roots and dates back to the introduction of concepts of western modernity, including

feminism, in Iran. As Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, an Iranian historian, has proposed, much of what forms the modern narrative of Iranian history is influenced by western and Eurocentric notions of modernity and concepts of ‘occidental rationality’ (2001: 4). He believes that, ‘whereas Europeans reconstituted the modern self in relation to their non-Western Others, Asians and Africans [and Middle Easterners] began to redefine their self in relation to Europe, their new significant Other’ (p 4). At the heart of this definition was a sort of ‘binary opposition’ influenced heavily by colonial and orientalist language that defined what was constituted as modern – western – and what was not. Although there were a few markers of difference that distinguished Iranian society from the modernised West, one of the biggest signs of difference was the condition of Iranian women. This was clearly marked in how Iranian women dressed, which immediately became a sign of Iran’s backwardness not only in the eyes of the West but also from the perspective of certain groups of western educated Iranian modernists. These ideas constructed a specific class within Iranian society in which women were given new forms of freedom. Consequently, some women gained the opportunity for education and entrance into the public domain. This not only exposed women to alternative concepts of gender relationships, particularly those driven by newly imported concepts of western feminism, but also gave them the ability to comment on and challenge social norms. This, as Nasrine Rahimieh has argued, has ‘informed [much of] Iran’s understanding of its own history’ (2003: 148). This influence on Iranian society, steeped in orientalist notions and dichotomies that were carried across with western notions of modernity, as Rahimieh argued, ‘underwrite the history of modern Iran’ (p 148). Furthermore, the revolution, which re-emphasised the East–West and gender dichotomies, created unresolved contradictions, not only between Iran and the West but also between Iranians themselves. As Said told us, ‘the modern Orient ... participates in its own Orientalizing’ (Said 1978: 325). This means that Iranians themselves, as pro-government writers from Iran, as educated diasporic writers, or even in defending women’s rights, are involved in the politics of what Rahimieh calls ‘self-orientalisation’. It is on this basis that I argue that diasporic Iranian women memoirists are involved in self-orientalisation. As Nima Naghibi put it, ‘in representing Persian women, [many] draw on what Foucault has called the “already-said,” or rather the repressed “never-said” of manifest discourse’ (2007: xvii). Many Iranian women

writers, coming from that privileged and educated class of Iranian society, to some degree identify with this discourse. As Naghibi reminded us

privileged Iranian women in the nineteenth century ... participated in the discursive subjugation of their working-class Persian counterparts. By positioning the Persian woman as the embodiment of oppressed womanhood, Western and elite Iranian women represented themselves as epitomes of modernity and progress. (p xvii)

I believe that this approach operates to date, particularly among diasporic western-educated women. One can argue that this has contributed to the somewhat limited descriptions and frameworks in their memoirs.

We only have to glance at the list of women who have been writing to prove this point. Most of the women who have written memoirs about their experiences can be traced to new modern Iranian elite families. Just to name a few, Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004), is the daughter of one of Tehran's mayors during the Shah's regime; her mother was one of the first women members of parliament during the Shah's regime. Nafisi is always proud of her mother's role, as well as of the fact that her grandmother attended university when other women barely left their homes. Sattareh Farman-Farmaian, the narrator of *Daughter of Persia* (1996), is a Qajar princess with a father who insisted on his daughter's education, even letting her go to America as one of the first women to travel outside Iran by herself in the early 1900s, at a time when her friends were being plucked out of middle school to get married. Lily Monadjemi, who wrote *Blood and carnations* (1993), and more recently *A matter of survival* (2010), is the descendent of Nasser-Al-Din Shah, one of the Iranian Shahs responsible for Iranians' encounter with modernity. Marjan Satrapi, the creator of *Persepolis* (2003) comic series, is a descendent of a Qajar monarch. Davar Ardalan, the author of *My name is Iran* (2008), is the daughter of Laleh Bakhtiar, one of the most prominent Iranian/American women scholars, and one of the only women who has translated the Koran from a feminist perspective. She traces her family tree back to Fath-Ali-Shah Qajar. Similarly, Shusha Guppy, the author of many books including *The blindfold horse* (1988), also a songwriter, singer and

filmmaker, was the daughter of a famous Iranian theologian who sent her to Paris in 1952 to study oriental languages and philosophy when she was only seventeen.

Although the above list is not inclusive of all writers with similar backgrounds, and excludes women of equal calibre in other areas, such as in sciences, politics, humanitarian work and so forth, as contributors to western (and Iranian) society, it is inclusive enough to demonstrate that most of what is being written about Iran outside Iran presently is informed by a specific class of Iranian society. This is not to deny or ignore the fact that women of non-aristocratic background, like Marina Nemat, Firoozeh Dumas, Gina Nahai and Susan Pari, are also contributing to this discourse. However, they too, though not carrying royal blood, by virtue of living outside Iran and writing in English could be considered within this privileged class of Iranian society.

This is not to say that all Iranian writers are oblivious to this ironic self-orientalisation. Some have tried to defy these predefined modes of reading and representation. Fatemeh Keshavarz, for instance, in her memoir *Jasmine and stars* (2007) tried to reframe this position, starting even from the cover of her book. Instead of using the conventional cover of passive veiled exotic women, her book has two modern Iranian girls with sunglasses, actively holding up signs, one reading 'We women want equal rights', and the other, 'violence against women equals violence against humanity'. In the content of her book, too, Keshavarz was very self-conscious. She clearly announced that her memoir is a critique of what she calls 'New Orientalist' narratives emerging from Iran by Iranian women, which are 'exaggerated and oversimplified at best and fully distorted at worst' (p 111). She compared the popularity of these memoirs to Rumi's elephant in the dark tale, where an elephant is brought into a city at night where no-one has seen one before. As each person touches each part of the elephant, they reduce their understanding to the partial encounter. She believes recently people in the West, as a 'matter of life or death' (p 7), want to know about the Middle East. Like the townspeople, they reach out to anyone with the hope of learning anything they can. But the problem is that most of these views, like each person's interpretation of the elephant, are

limited and partial. In her memoir Keshavarz hopes to create ‘an alternative approach for learning about an unfamiliar culture’ (p 2).

Although there is much more to say about this, my conclusion is partially hopeful. Following the controversial 2009 elections a shift occurred in the way Iran and Iranians were viewed in the West. With the rapid circulation of clips from protests, a different Iran came into view. Here, women were no longer silent, passive and domestic. Rather, they could be seen alongside the men in opposition to the government. As the world witnessed, women like Neda Agha Sultan, who was shot in the street and died on camera, suffered the violation of their rights as humans at the hands of the Islamic government. Out of the ashes of these protests, a new interest emerged in narratives emerging from Iran. The world was no longer interested in delayed stories by silenced and oppressed diasporic women. Rather, people wanted to hear stories about what was happening in Iran at the moment. Consequently, we are now seeing the beginnings of a third wave of memoirs from Iran, not only from Iranian women but more so from Iranian men. My partial hopefulness only considers the fact Iranian women are now being seen in a new light; yet what I am not so hopeful about is the modes of readings surrounding the production, reception and consumption of this newly emerging third wave of Iranian memoirs.

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