

From Tehran to Tehrangeles: The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs

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Recently Wai Chee Dimock argued for approaches to genres as fields of knowledge that map literary texts in terms of dynamic links and pathways with “many outlets, ripples and cascades” (1378). This argument suggests that genres are not neat bundles with clearly defined borders and taxonomies, policed by national or chronological or formal properties, but kinship networks that are fluid and dynamic. Thinking about genres in this way is vital for memoirs and testimony most particularly, for these ebb and flow with history, and their cultural geography maps the ongoing shifts in volatile networks of consumption, pleasure and agency that carry life narrative. This transnational and porous idea of genre shapes the approach to the recent memoir boom from women writers of the Iranian diaspora that follows. Quantitatively speaking, this surge of Iranian exilic memoir is readily apparent with the publication of over a dozen memoirs in the past decade, but how these might be bundled and read together generically as autobiographical effects remains an open question. This article uses Dimock’s idea of kinship networks to suggest some generic links and pathways, some routes for thinking across the texts, traditions and cultures of recent Iranian memoirs in English.

Memoirs raise critical issues about the production, circulation, and consumption of life narrative. Memoir is an account of historical events written from personal knowledge. Helen Buss grasps its dynamics succinctly: memoirs personalise history and historicise the personal. They are about individuals, and they are also about an event, an era, an institution, or an identity. It is no accident that Buss proceeds to speculate about genre more widely to grasp “memoir”¹ and her attention to the sharply historicised subjectivities produced by memoir suggests why it responds well to Dimock’s idea of genres as loose bundles that jostle and

move in “ripples and cascades”: the precarious lives that are brought into view through memoirs are subject to change, and the shifting subjectivities of memoirs is an index of historical, cultural, political, social changes across global networks. This suggests a series of questions about this surge of Iranian women’s memoir: which writers and readers are empowered by this memory work? To whom and under what circumstances and to what ends? How are certain realities constructed, maintained and called into question here? John Frow’s reminder that, for all that reality seems to be singular and external to the forms through which we apprehend it, genres are “fixes” on the world that have formative power as representational frames is particularly important in approaching memoirs: “genres create effects of reality and truth that are central to the ways the world is understood” (1632). This idea of the fix and frames of genre is useful for Iranian memoirs: these open up a space for a gendered discourse about Iran and the Islamic republic, so what do they say about women, gender, and sexuality? How do they relate to the ideoscapes of feminism as they empower women as writers, readers, and subjects? What gendered subjectivities are historicised now through these memories of a traumatic event as it has played out on and through the bodies of women?

A transnational approach to contemporary women’s life writing suggests some more expansive possibilities in thinking about generic precursors for this upsurge of Iranian women’s memoirs. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith extend the concept of “scar literature” to consider the boom of Chinese memoirs that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.² Like Iranian women’s memoirs in the new millennium, autobiographical narratives of the Cultural Revolution in China engage subjectively with a process of historical revision and a time of trauma and loss and cataclysmic social change. These memoirs take a series of different forms, and Cultural Revolution literature, or scar literature, circulates in different networks within China and overseas. In the 1990s traumatic accounts of the Revolution by women became highly valued commodities in Western markets intrigued by lives of exotic others and tantalised by trauma narrative. The extraordinary popularity of Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* is the epicentre of this phenomenon, just as *Reading “Lolita” in*

Tehran has been an iconic Iranian diasporic memoir in the recent past; in each case this single text is a sign of a more substantial autobiographical event. Schaffer and Smith's discussion of Chinese women's narratives suggests how the textual cultures of this cascade of memoir are complex and active within different national and transnational formations, where they serve different ends. This discussion connects usefully to Buss's remarks on empowerment and the subjectivities of women's memoirs in mass media networks. Schaffer and Smith consider the reception of iconic autobiographical narratives by Jung Chang, Xinran, Nien Cheng, and Anchee Min, among others, that are the best-known of a series of memoirs published in the West to international acclaim in the 1990s and accommodated within the broader trend to trauma narratives at the *fin de siècle*. They suggest that these narratives often conveyed a mood of "exilic melancholy" and promoted empathic identification with women's stories. In this discussion of Chinese memoirs the concept of scar literature is extended to raise questions about the commodification of suffering, gendered discourses of trauma, the transmission of cultural memory across generations, and the circulation and authorisation of trauma story in different global networks at one and the same time.

Thinking in terms of how trauma story travels in volatile and transnational networks of consumption, pleasure and agency in this way establishes a useful precursor for approaching Iranian women's memoirs too. This memoir boom is principally in English from the diaspora, and its public is North American middlebrow readerships. The notable exception here is Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening*, this memoir surge is fuelled by exilic energies that do not translate and in fact are rarely translated into Persian, and to date they have not been translated into major European languages in significant numbers either.³ Although Schaffer and Smith comment on the "seemingly insatiable appetite of Western readers for Chinese horror stories" (205), these trauma stories by Chinese women are perishables, and they have been pushed off the shelf by, among other things, a similar generic "event" that speaks to the moment: memoirs by diasporic Iranian women that also have a traumatic story to tell. From this it may seem to be a short step to a cynical dismissal of trauma story as a fashionable product, a commodity cater-

ing to a public that browses indiscriminately. Dimock's idea of the fluid mutations of genres suggests another response: we must read for genre in a more dynamic and engaged way that takes into account the different stakes of autobiographical narrators, their readerships, and the transnational publishing houses that invest in these as valuable commodities. These various concerns are particularly important in reading memoirs, which offer formative subjective discursive mappings of the world. We know that life narrative is a powerful resource in the pursuit of human rights, and it has the capacity to humanise categories of people who otherwise remain obscure; memoirs allow space for a meditation about the self in history, and they are routes for intergenerational memory work. As Schaffer and Smith's more expansive approach to the genre of scar literature in China suggests, its networks are transnational and migratory across very different interests and investments, and its generic fix raises questions about the commodification of suffering, the pleasures of exilic melancholy for writers and their public, the desire for the postcolonial exotic, and gendered discourses of trauma. All of this establishes important issues in approaching the surge of Iranian memoirs. These seem to be very different generic events, yet the concept of scar literature suggests some kinship networks that open up a more expansive transnational approach to life narratives in the wake of trauma.

Memoirs in English by Iranian women began to emerge relatively recently. The search engine at any online bookstore now identifies a dozen memoirs or more, all published since the late 1990s and threaded together by booksellers with claims to authentic and personal accounts of the revolution.⁴ Booksellers and reviews online reiterate key themes in the Iranian memoirs: reflections on the experience of expatriation and exile. Glimpses into the intimate spaces of upper middle-class urban Iranian domestic life in vivid detail; life in the USA as a child of immigrants; and more complex and nuanced representations of life in Iran at a time when it is reduced in propaganda to the "axis of evil." Reader reviews make astute observations about issues of gender and class here: this is writing by and about women; it revolves around the cosmopolitan elite privileged under the regime of the Shah and disinherited by the revolution; it is dense with exotic aromatics: memories of walled

gardens, pomegranates and pistachios, and saffron skies. The fix of these memoirs take readers to the privileged spaces of North Tehran, frequently remembered in these memoirs in terms of childhood memory as a lost Eden.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading "Lolita"* are bookends, the very different bestsellers that indicate the range and diversity of this memoir boom. Marji, Satrapi's child avatar is an innocent and endearing narrator, well-placed to describe intimately the transformations that had their impact on the bodies of women in particular and which disrupted life in her loving and close family; she is also a guileless avatar able to present Western readers with brief and fantastic stories of Iranian history and Persian mythology in the form of graphic memoir. This avatar is recently the star of a major film, released by Sony Pictures and co-directed by Satrapi, a graphic artist who works from the L'Association collective in Paris. Nafisi's autobiographical narrator and her prose memoir *Reading "Lolita"* are very different. A young professor of English Literature, recently returned to Tehran with a PhD from the University of Oklahoma in the late seventies, she creates a cell of resistance for a small group of bright young women, who cast off the *chador* at her door and enter a space of enchantment and empathy created by Austen, Fitzgerald, and Nabokov. Critics, myself included, have commented on the powerful affirmation of Nafisi's reading group for Western readers, for this reading group and its pedagogue present a powerful defence of the Great Tradition of English in the course of its critique of the Islamic republic (Whitlock, Naghibi). Nafisi's autobiographical "I" draws deeply on exilic melancholy and high modernism to reinstate the Great Books of the western canon. As the Iranian American literary critic Fatemeh Keshavarz argues at some length in her memoir *Jasmine and Stars*, written as a deliberate and strategic counter to Nafisi's highly celebrated memoir: *Reading "Lolita"* approaches relations between Iran and the west in terms of discourses of otherness and difference. Keshavarz on the other hand weaves narratives from Persian literature through her memoir as a gesture to texts and authors that remain excluded from *Reading "Lolita."* The differences between Nafisi and Keshavarz are indicative: these memoirs are a diasporic phenome-

non, many of them are sensitive to debates in the Iranian American community about representations of the Islamic republic, and gender politics are at the heart of this. Keshavarz is troubled by the “new orientalism” she sees emerging in the burgeoning “eyewitness literature” by expatriate Iranians, and her concerns are shared—for example Zeynab Sarbaazi includes in her response to *Jasmine and Stars*: “Personally I loved it because it vocalised many of the thoughts and uneasy feelings that I have as an Iranian woman when I see all these books about Iranian women’s lives in Barnes & Noble, most of them tales of abuse or political strife.”⁵

Persepolis and *Reading “Lolita”* are the most celebrated and notorious bookends of this network of memoirs, whereas Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* might be taken as a bookmark, and more representative of the genre. The autobiographical Azadeh places herself in the “lost generation” of the revolution, and from the outset it is clear that the narrator of the memoir is an astute writer and critic who is well aware of contemporary debates about memory, subjectivity and identity, and post-colonial critiques of orientalism: “I was born in Palo Alto, California, into the lap of an Iranian diaspora community awash in nostalgia and longing for an Iran many thousands of miles away. As a girl, raised on the distorting myths of exile ... I had no doubt I was Persian. Persian like a fluffy cat, a silky carpet—a vaguely Oriental notion belonging to history untraceable on a map. It was the term we insisted on using at the time, embarrassed by any association with Iran, the modern country, the hostage-taking Death Star. Living a myth, a fantasy, made it easier to be Iranian in America” (vi). The autobiographical Azadeh moves to Tehran in 2000; working as a journalist for *Time* magazine she witnesses the reform movement as it gathered pace during the presidency of Khatami, and she deliberately conceives a new identity by a laboured entry into her mother tongue, Farsi. As an American in Iran, she lays claim to her place in a distinctive generation there: young women engaged in a struggle against the Islamic regime through small acts of defiance played out upon the female body in the rituals of everyday life: coloured veils, nail polish, sandals—the “soft weapons” of a lipstick jihad.⁶ Most importantly, a transaction occurs: “the search for home, for Iran, had taken

me not to a place but back to myself” (245), and this self emerges from a reckoning with two worlds: Iran *and* the USA; *Iranian in America and American in Iran*. Although these memoirs are a generation beyond the crude oppositions of Betty Mahmoody’s *Not Without My Daughter* (which is frequently invoked quite specifically as a loathed example of civilizational thinking) these narrators are also engaged in a process of articulating how they are American women: this is about Persia *and* Palo Alto, the lap of the Iranian diaspora in the USA. These are the key coordinates of Iranian women’s memoirs as a global literary formation.

The autobiographical Azadeh is familiar with the tropes of exile and belonging, the flaws of nostalgic memory, the stereotypes of the postcolonial exotic, and she is also enchanted by the “homing device” that binds her to Iran emotionally. The perspective of a child narrator predominates in many of these memoirs, and childhood memory accentuates further the tropes of nostalgic memory. This is the second generation that recalls from the perspective of childhood innocence the trauma of displacement for parents and grandparents, brief trips “home,” and the strange belatedness of exilic culture in the Iranian diaspora: “I began to wonder how much of my perception of Iran was shaded by Mama and Baba’s presentation of it—both before the revolution and afterward, when Iran continued to be filtered to me through the eyes of adults” (Bahrapour 203). Bahrapour’s *To See and See Again* is especially memorable in this respect: her Iranian father and American mother leave Iran and the family home becomes a red Chevrolet Malibu as they drift on Californian highways looking for a new home: “We had left at the end of my childhood, and like childhood it had frozen in my mind into a mythical land” (203). It is no surprise, given the intensity of this dispossession, that Bahrapour returns to Iran and recuperates a timeless authentic culture, travelling beyond the cities to where signs of her ancestors’ ownership and authority remain intact: this is the fantastic “Persia” that connects only tenuously to the contemporary republic of Iran.

Moaveni’s memoir suggests the generic fix that frames the kinship network of these memoirs. It is shaped by gendered discourses of memory, identity, and place, and generational identities are formative, for they anchor different kinds of memory work. Although this memoir boom

is fuelled in a surge of exilic memory from the “lost generation,” the children of the revolution, it is not exclusively so. Shirin Ebadi’s heroic *Iran Awakening* is one of the rare examples of memoir in English from those who remained to struggle with and against the Islamic regime within Iran. Like Nafisi, Ebadi experienced the Islamic revolution as an adult and as it was played out on the streets of Tehran. Satrapi too narrates from memory of the revolution in the first person. Alternatively, Moaveni (who co-authored Ebadi’s memoir in an interesting example of intergenerational autobiographical work) has the more characteristic profile: she was born in the Iranian diasporic community, and *Lipstick Jihad* emerges as the cross-generational transmission of traumatic memory in the diaspora, and principally around kitchen tables in the USA, as she herself reminds us.⁷ These autobiographical narrators are ideally placed to appeal to a wide readership: just “Other” enough to represent her subject authoritatively, and at the same time familiar enough not to alienate her audience.⁸

In terms of audience address, these memoirs of the revolution are born in innocence: their characteristic focus on the recollections of child narrators license or naturalise a limited grasp of political and ideological dimensions of the revolution and the republic. These women write as daughters witnessing mourning and trauma within the family. Autobiographical narrators reveal little of the professional or personal life of the “I,” the diagesis of the memoirs is fragmentary, contracted to memory and loss, and to the work of recovery and reconciliation understood in terms of hybridity, process, transnationalism. Both Bahrapour and Moaveni, for example, conclude their memoir with images of distinctly postmodern selfhood, in Moaveni’s case figured through the mystical bird of Persian epic, the Simorgh. All of this a potent mix for memoirs: the recollection of traumatic change and loss through the senses of the daughter, the return to Iran as a literate young woman with a powerful sense of originary identity, the engagement of western-educated women writers with a regime where repression and resistance is played out on and through the bodies of women, and the attractions of cosmopolitan hybridity as an identity available to this educated and highly literate diasporic elite.

The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs

One explanation for the fix of these memoirs is psychosomatic: they express and respect the affective needs of Iranians exiled by the revolution and its aftermath, bringing to light a belated mourning for traumatic events some two decades earlier as the generations that recall pre-revolutionary Iran in the first person are diminished. This is a compelling rationale for this cluster of memoir. This explanation derives from an organic approach to life writing informed by recent trauma theory based on second generation Holocaust memoir: like other symptoms of post traumatic stress, autobiographical truth will eventually manifest itself some decades later. This is how these memoirs present their origins self-reflexively, by and large. However this explanation underestimates how memoirs connect publishers, readers, and critics in the ebb and flow of ideoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, and ethnoscapes in complex and changing ways. Global networks of communications, trade, and migration carry ideas, goods, bodies, and images across vast and unpredictable networks. These are vital to the circulation, reception, and production of life narrative, and they mediate its fluid and dynamic routes across cultures. Scar literature, like other generic episodes in the production and reception of memoir and testimony, may appear to be organic as it emerges from experiences of profound trauma and loss—it is above all a mark of irreparable damage and wounding across generations. Nevertheless Frow's notion of the fix of genres is a reminder of the formative power of representational frames. Memoirs find their public and produce their autobiographical subjects in discursive formations that are "porously bounded and schematic domains of meanings, values and affects, together with the instructions for handling them" (1633). That is to say, memoirs are profoundly historical in their subjects and discursive in their performance of subjectivities. Essential to the fix of Iranian women's memoirs is the ongoing percolation of the revolution across generational and intellectual formations outside of Iran. It is here we need to turn from Persia back to Palo Alto and the "lap" of the Iranian diaspora.

This memoir surge has empowered a gendered and generational intelligentsia within the diaspora. Moaveni is representative of the kinship networks that shape this generic event: many of these autobiographers

are young women born in the 70s, raised in the USA, and trained as journalists in American universities during the 1990s. For those who write from the Iranian diaspora in the USA—Moaveni, Bahrapour, Hakakian, Asayesh, Dumas, among others—memories of the Iranian homeland are coloured by nostalgia: mourning for a lost homeland. Frequently (though not exclusively) this memory work is mediated through the exilic zone called “Tehrangeles,” one of the largest colonies of the Iranian diaspora on the west coast of the USA; more generally, an education in the liberal arts in the USA is an important common denominator.⁹ Azadeh locates herself in this way: “a student of a liberal American education, taught to apply my political beliefs to my everyday life—to recycle and vote, to respect picket lines and observe boycotts ...” (170). These young women are professionally trained to write for a middlebrow North American readership, with a good eye for anecdote and a colloquial style that engages directly with female and middle-class readers who are eager for empathic engagement with other worlds. Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad*, Hakakian’s *Journey from the Land of No* and Bahrapour’s *To See and See Again* are compelling because their relation to Iran is shaped by what Appadurai might describe as the “ethnoscapes” of personal experience—the need to connect to a homeland for a sense of identity from the Iranian US diaspora. Equally important in the fix of this memoir surge are the mediascapes of their professional training and experiences as journalists, and the ideoscapes of identity politics as the Islamic revolution continues to play out within and beyond Iran and impact upon thinking about gender, sexuality and identity. This memoir boom is energised by second generation women in the Iranian diaspora, “originating in a troubled country, yet growing up outside it” (Moaveni 32).

All of this is a reminder to engage with memoir as (to return to Buss) personalised history *and* the performance of an historicised subjectivity (the distinction is critical). Moaveni’s sense of self is highly reflexive, and her autobiographical “I” is shaped by the understandings of ethnicity and identity that she learned as “academic lingo” (27) at Santa Cruz in the late 1990s, where multiculturalism, diaspora, exile, hybridity, and difference were hotly contested topics: “The notion of finding

power in your otherness, once I got over the pretentiousness of those sorts of terms, was incredibly compelling” (27). Although the memoir presents identity as a work in progress chronotopically on the streets of Tehran, understandings of identity emerging from ideoscapes that energised American literary and cultural criticism in the 1990s are germinal. In fact, the Iranian diaspora in the USA has been a vital intelligentsia in producing powerful ideas about exilic identity that have contributed to debates about multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity, and transnationalism—concepts that are taken up performatively in these memoirs.

For example, Hamid Naficy’s work on “accented cinema” originally emerges from work on Iranian film and television in Los Angeles and it produces an approach to diasporas and exilic subjects that is useful for reading the kinship network that spawns these memoirs. Naficy’s account of exilic subjectivity foregrounds a performative approach to autobiographical representations that emphasize the biographical dislocations of the self. He characterises “accented cinema” as nostalgic, liminal, circling around subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, and identity, drawn to important transitional and transnational places and spaces and objects such as borders, airports, streets, hotels, trains, and planes, and suitcases:

They cross many borders and engage in many deterritorialising and reterritorialising journeys, which take several forms, including home-seeking journeys, journeys of homelessness, and homecoming journeys. However these journeys are not just physical and territorial but are also deeply psychological and philosophical. Among the most important are journeys of identity, in the course of which old identities are sometimes shed and new ones refashioned. In the best of the accented films, identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, even a performance of identity. (6)

This is as good a description of the fix of this Iranian memoir boom as I can devise, and it serves to make the point about its distinctively American accents. Following Naficy we are not surprised that the Introduction to Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad* features Azadeh unpacking the

boxes of belongings gathered in two years in Tehran, or that the first page of Bahrampour's *To See and See Again* includes a description of the contents of the trunk of the Chevrolet, or that some of the most powerful graphics in *Persepolis* are of departures from Meherabad airport. There is a profound reflexivity between the Iranian diaspora and current theories of exilic culture and identity.

These memoirs produce powerful and lyrical accounts of healing and reconciliation in the second generation through a quest for identity recovered in domestic familial spaces that survive the Islamic republic; these are the daughters of the revolution. They also offer an affirmation of the resilient and multicultural subcultures within the USA in times when fundamentalisms of all kinds are on the rise. American values and identities are recognised and affirmed here. Furthermore, feminist debates that were triggered by the events of 1979 are recycled and revived as the revolution is renarrativised by this younger generation of Iranian women. And so what can we make of the revolution as it resurfaces in women's life narratives now? Is it a conduit for a transnational feminism that might manoeuvre across issues of gender, sexuality, faith, and ethnicity? Can it escape the trappings that capture Iranian women as exotic/oppressed/fundamentalist others in need of rescue by a Western sisterhood?

As I have suggested, these traumatic childhood memories archived in exilic cultures are a hive of nostalgia, and their engagement with the past is notoriously self-centred. Can these daughters of the revolution engage with the subjects and subjectivities of history anew?¹⁰ In *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*, Nima Naghibi recalls the impact of the revolution on transnational feminism in the late 70s.¹¹ Global sisterhood was an early casualty, and this is captured graphically in Kate Millett's memoir *Going to Iran* (1982), with her instinctive recoil from the sight of Iranian women in *chador*, who seem to her less than fully human. The revolution was immediately recognised as urgent women's business, and the icons of second wave feminism all had something to say: Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Millett especially, who travelled to Tehran as a gesture of solidarity in March 1979 and was expelled that same month. Naghibi's analysis examines

the irreconcilable tensions between American liberal feminism and the dynamics of a mass-mobilised anti-imperialist revolution that emerged around the removal of the Shah. The presence of the American feminists catalysed the antifeminist violence. The discrediting of the Iranian feminist movement by conservative clerics followed (95). Now, decades later, the commercial success of Nafisi's *Reading "Lolita"* amongst North American feminists recalls these debates about feminism, fundamentalism, and representations of Iran in western media. A number of critics, me included, have suggested that the representations of post-revolutionary Iran in *Reading "Lolita"* are problematic. And yet thinking about the kinship networks of these memoirs more globally suggests that issues of gender, feminism and cross-cultural engagements raised by *Reading "Lolita"* may be symptomatic.

To pursue this point and approach Nafisi's autobiographical narrator and the generic fix of these memoirs comparatively we can turn to the other "bookend": Marji, Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical avatar. The graphic memoir *Embroideries* is a supplement to the *Persepolis* duet that has received relatively little attention, but comparisons with Nafisi's memoir are suggestive. As in *Reading "Lolita,"* this memoir presents us with a "women's room" in Tehran in the early 1990s, and it explores the relations amongst women.¹² Originally published by L'Association as *Broderies* in 2003, it was translated and published in English as *Embroideries* in 2005. The sewing metaphor signals a turn to memory work, history, and the gendered world of women. The small blocky figure of Marji in the cutout on the cover of *Persepolis 1* is recalled in the ornately decorated sepia cover of *Embroideries*, though here it frames the seductive youthful figure of Marji's grandmother. Compared to the two volumes of *Persepolis*, *Embroideries* seems an *amusee bouche*: a contracted delight and entertainment. It is a small comics book—described by one reviewer as a "sort of Middle East chicklit" memoir—and focuses on a single afternoon's discussion amongst a group of three generations of Iranian women around the samovar in the Satrapi living room in Tehran in 1991, when Marji is in her early twenties—like Nafisi, Satrapi left Iran for permanent exile later that decade. The subject is singular: sex, and sexuality. There are marked departures from *Persepolis* in the layout

and design: the multiple and changing frames of the comics page in *Persepolis* is transformed as each unnumbered page of *Embroideries* is a single frame dominated by the black on white shapes of the women and the changing patterns of their dialogue, which is a confessional yet unrepentant “ventilations of the heart.” The dialogue balloons capture gossip and innuendo in mobile and changing forms across the pages of the text; often large and filled with handwritten script, Satrapi suggests the drama and pleasure of this shared communion of speaking and listening amongst women by shifting the shape and relations amongst the balloons. In this way she captures the sequence of speech whilst discarding the traditional medium for conveying time progression in the comics: the frame. Sometimes the balloons overwhelm the page and replace the images of the women entirely—a wonderful graphic representation of gossip.

The stories the women exchange are bawdy and outrageous memories of their sexual experiences—ruses to fake virginity, escape an elderly betrothed, deceive lovers, speculations about whether European men are able to satisfy women, the dubious aesthetics of the penis, and cosmetic surgery. It is here that the title becomes political and poignant: “embroidery” is an Iranian colloquialism for surgery on the vagina to restore the semblance of virginity. It is virginity that is the continuing thread of the stories, which are tragic and painful although told and received in a spirit of dark humour. A young girl is betrothed to an aged man, another is duped of her dowry, another finds she is married to a homosexual. There are three generations of women in the room, and they are not outside of history, although the narration is shaped by intimate and private memory that only occasionally refers to public events—this is after all a community where revolution and war has fractured relationships, and produced both martyrs and exiles. These are Muslim women whose intimate lives are arranged by patriarchal and religious tradition, and the stories relate how they manoeuvre within the constraints and expectations that are in part sustained by women themselves. Mothers arrange bad marriages for their daughters, wives have false expectations of marriage and relocation to Europe, opiates provide some relief (grandmother is addicted to “a bit of burnt opium in her tea to regain

her sense of humour and her natural kindness” [n.pag], for example), and Marji is socialised into the pragmatic community of women: “That’s life! Sometimes you’re on the horse’s back, and sometimes it’s the horse that’s on your back” (n.pag).

This extraordinary fragment of memoir both allows and resists that orientalist desire of western readers to pierce the community of Muslim women and master its secrets. A small book about the most intimate stories shared amongst a group of middle class and urban Muslim women in Tehran a decade after the revolution, it approaches the most difficult question for cross cultural dialogue: the “full” embroidery. In the diagnosis of the memoir “embroidery” occurs in a sequence of stories about cosmetic surgery, which includes a tale of Chaucerian ribaldry where one of the wives jokes “of course this idiot doesn’t know that every time he kisses my breasts, it’s actually my ass he’s kissing ...” (n.pag). It is impossible to read this account of “embroideries” without the spectral presence of female genital mutilation, but “embroideries” is not framed as an archaic or definitive symbol of Muslim fundamentalism. To the contrary, this is an issue of women’s sexuality that recurs in the West too, where (as one of the women remarks) virginity remains highly prized; in fact, Marji learns, “embroideries” in Europe are “more reliable.” The carnivalesque mode, with its estranged relation to the real, risks what might otherwise be prohibited in discussions about women’s sexuality and Islam.

What could be more different from Nafisi’s highly erudite memoir and its celebration of literary modernism in critique of the Islamic republic? Yet the generic bundle of exilic memoirs suggests *Reading “Lolita”* and *Embroideries*, high modernism and chicklit, might be read together productively. Both reflect upon the gendered experiences of a group of relatively privileged and urbanised Muslim women of different generations who are cosmopolitan in outlook and sensibility and, often, experience. Both take up issues of gender, sexuality, and faith as they are played out in the upper middle class domestic spaces of Tehran a decade after the revolution. Both adopt the privileged crosscultural status of an exilic autobiographical “I” to translate between the two radically different cultural axes of her identity. To return the generic relation as Frow understands

it: genres are constellations of thematic, formal and historical dimensions, that organise knowledge about and attitudes toward the discursive worlds they constitute and refer to (1633). The discursive world of these memoirs returns to the Islamic revolution and shapes a language to fill the silence around the intractable issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and faith that defeated second wave feminism three decades ago.

It may appear that Nafisi most egregiously turns to the west to frame the language and affective domain of her memoir in tutoring her young women to discard the chador and become avid consumers of Great Books. In Satrapi's comics the agency of women is played out through a very different but nonetheless gendered access to consumer culture, where "embroidery" takes its place alongside other fashionable commodities for body enhancement. Like *Lipstick Jihad*, *Embroideries* celebrates *bad-hijabi*: the ruses of women, their appetite for fashion, pleasure and seduction, and the "soft weapons" that subvert the patriarchal order of the regime; beauty and consumer culture become an index of freedom. The blank dark space of Millett's veiled women is filled with the plumage of coloured veils, and Muslim women are no longer "everything alien." To the contrary they are familiar subjects, constituted in and through transglobal networks of celebrity and youth cultures, where choice, freedom and identity are closely linked to discourses of consumer capitalism.

This brings us back to that earlier reference to the ongoing shifts in volatile networks of consumption, pleasure and agency that carry memoirs as a generic bundle, and a valuable globalised commodity itself. Resonances between this literature of the Iranian diaspora and Inderpal Grewal's recent study of multiculturalism and the production of middle-class Asian, Indian, and American subjects in the 1990s are striking. The argument that at the end of the twentieth century gender, ethnicity, and consumer identity became entangled in transnational formations suggests some of the wider ideoscapes that surface in this memoir boom. Most precisely, Grewal is interested in connections between feminism, neoliberalism, and consumer culture at the turn of this century, and the specific kinds of feminisms that are powerful enough to move across transnational connectivities now. Her conclusion that there has been a

convergence amongst struggles for liberal democratic rights, consumer culture and powerful imaginaries of “America” and the “American way of life” indicate some wider influences on the generic fix of Iranian exilic memoirs. The fact that Azar Nafisi was featured as an icon in an advertising campaign for Audi cars in North America in the spring of 2004 is one sign of how exilic renarrativisation of the revolution might become available to the American dream, and so too is a *Washington Post* review of *Embroideries*: “Who’d have thought that behind Iran’s closed doors the conversation would be as wholesome as ‘American Pie?’” (Anuff). Grewal’s work opens up wider questions about memoirs travel as a commodity embedded in discourses of feminism, empowerment, pleasure, and consumer cultures in late modernity.

The first time round, Nafisi’s *Reading “Lolita”* seemed to me singular and problematic, a powerful memoir driven by exilic and literary aesthetics. In a deliberately “lento” reading in *Soft Weapons*, I unravelled the American and English disciplinary connections of Nafisi’s highly aestheticised reading room in Tehran (2007, 372).¹³ Thinking differently, mapping the generic formulation that “fixes” a bundle of memoirs here, other perspectives emerge: more expansive, comparative, and speculative. In this frame, *Reading “Lolita”* becomes symptomatic of a kinship network of memoirs scarred by trauma and loss transferred across generations, which trades as a lucrative commodity in global networks sustained by desires for exotic orientalisms. This approach, to return to Dimock, has selected a different level of resolution, pursuing networks, bundles, and caches of texts that exceed national and chronological literary formations to explore other horizons of interpretation. Now, as in 1979, the fix of memoirs spawned by the Iranian revolution signals intractable issues in thinking about women, feminism, and life writing across cultures, as well as possibilities for mobilising alternative ways of framing the subject.

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Notes

- 1 "... to understand memoir as a genre separate from autobiography we need to consider genre not only in the traditional way, as a set of writing practices, but also as a particular ideologically shaped discourse, in which we take into account the functional aspects of genre, the way in which a genre arises from particular social needs, empowers a particular class of people, and becomes a cultural practice. Such a view of genre is always sensitive to issues such as gender, class, race, and sexual orientation" (595).
- 2 Scar literature, or "literature of the wounded," is a genre of Chinese fiction, which emerged in the late 1970s and focused on trauma and oppression during the Cultural Revolution and the rule of the Gang of Four. Scar literature is generally understood as a way of bearing witness to the past, with recognition of the difficulties of narrating traumatic experiences, and for this reason the term is useful for approaching the networks of Cultural Revolution narratives more broadly, as Schaffer and Smith's analysis suggests.
- 3 A quick enquiry indicates that only Nafisi's memoir has been translated into German, for example, whereas several other memoirs of the revolution by women have been published in German—Maryam Ansary, *Flieh, bevor der Morgen graut. Die Geschichte einer iranischen Frau*; Reza Hajatpour, *Der brennende Geschmack der Freiheit. Mein Leben als junger Mullah im Iran*; Chahdortt Djavann & Anje Nattefort, *Parvaneh heißt Schmetterling* (originally published in French). The globalisation of the book trade does not preclude (and in fact possibly facilitates) the maintenance of smaller national, linguistic and regional markets, which do not necessarily mimic the dominant English language domains of mass market publishing.
- 4 An indicative but not exhaustive list would include memoirs by Davar Ardalan, Tara Bahrapour, Gelareh Asayesh, Shirin Ebadi, Azadeh Moaveni, Firoozeh Dumas, Monir Farmanfarman and Zara Houshmand, Roya Hakakian, Fatemeh Keshavarz, Marjane Satrapi, Azar Nafisi, and Afschineh Latifi.
- 5 Zeynab Sarbaazi's comments at the IranWrites blog is in response to a lengthy and thoughtful review of *Jasmine and Stars* posted by Mina, which is linked from the amazon.com site collection of comments on Keshavarz's book: http://www.amazon.com/review/product/0807831093/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_helpful?%5Fencoding=UTF8&coliid=&showViewpoints=1&colid=&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending. See too Sabaazi's own essay on Keshavarz and Iranian women's memoirs more generally, "The New Orientalism."
- 6 Naghibi's discussion of the figure of the *bad-hijabi*, the badly/inappropriately veiled woman, fleshes out the challenge their tactics pose to the regime's politics of economic and social equality and its enforcement of female chastity and morality; they also challenge the fashion politics of their mother's generation. However, as Naghibi suggests, the *bad-hijabi* challenges contemporary stereotypes of the veiled woman as desexualised and abject and invoke Orientalist representations

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- of veiled women as sensual objects of desire. See “Scopophilic Desires” in *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*.
- 7 Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” is useful here: a form of memory produced by images, stories and transgenerational hauntings rather than recollections of personal experience.
 - 8 This is Naghibi’s characterisation of journalists such as Alexandra Avakian and Christiane Amanpour, who “use their status as North Americanised Iranians to reveal the mystery of the Oriental woman to a Western audience long obsessed with peeking behind the veil” (71).
 - 9 For example although Azar Nafisi and Fatemeh Keshavarz adopt very different approaches in their memoirs both are eminent literary academics in American academia, at Johns Hopkins and St Louis respectively.
 - 10 Minoo Moallem’s discussion of the long tradition of “civilizational imperialism” suggests the risk that imperialist discourses depicting Persian women as passive victims might resurface in the fantastic and seemingly innocent memory worlds of exilic memoir.
 - 11 Naghibi also returns to these questions about feminism and the Islamic revolution as memory work in the second generation: “like other Iranians of my generation who were old enough to feel the impact of the revolution in 1979 ... I have literally felt the effects of the discursive shift in the West from “exotic Persian” to “fundamentalist Islamist” and, more specifically, to “oppressed Muslim woman” (ix).
 - 12 In interview with Noy Thrupkaew, Satrapi responds to a question about how women use the powerful and private space of gender segregation in Iran: “It has always been like that. Even before the Islamic Republic, we were always a very traditional country. When you have such strong traditions, you have very extreme reactions. In such societies, discussion between the women is the space for freedom. These stories don’t present a complacent view about women, that they are all suffering, oh my god. They’re not victims. And I refuse it completely, I hate that image. Even in the worst days of the Islamic Republic, I never saw myself as a victim. We always have the choice to do something else, to make a parallel life.”
 - 13 This draws on J. Hillis Miller’s contrast of “allegro” and “lento” reading. “Allegro” reading is the unselfconscious and imaginative immersion in the literary text, whereas the “lento” reading is the more measured and questioning approach, which examines how the text “ticks” (124).

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