

Unveiling America:
The Popularization of Iranian Exilic Memoirs In Post 9/11
American Society

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Iranian History In Multiple Dimensions.....3

Chapter 1: America’s Expanding Society.....16

Chapter 2: *Reading Lolita* Under Attack.....36

Chapter 3: *The Complete Persepolis*: Picturing Identity.....57

Conclusion: Instigating Cultural Growth.....78

Bibliography.....83

Introduction: Iranian History in Multiple Dimensions

With the growing political tensions between the powers of the West and those of the Middle East, the representative voices of these respective regions ameliorate a cross-cultural understanding of human experience. The contemporary appeal of Middle Eastern literature for Western and exilic audiences affirm a personal connection to themes of identity conflict and self-reflection among global society. Anglophone Iranian works, in particular, rose in popularity among American readers in the early 2000s and continue their prevalence among book clubs across the nation. As the daughter of two Iranian immigrants, I can infer from my own fascination how Iranian literature arose. However, the increasingly hostile rhetoric surrounding Iran in the United States produces the following questions: Why would Americans want to read Iranian authors directly following the infamous 9/11 attacks? And why do they, for the most part, enjoy reading them?

In this piece, I examine the current debates surrounding diasporic Iranian literature and its appeal to American readers. Utilizing two central literary texts, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) and Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* (2007)¹, I complicate current critical debates to provide a cultural and socially contextual explanation for the popularity of these works in America in the early 2000s. In my analysis, I find that the two texts appeal to the American public in their discussions of identity and persona, as they relate to different sociopolitical spheres. While drawing parallels to the social critiques of the Western literary canon, Nafisi's text

¹ Satrapi's French publisher, *L'Association* originally published the book in four segments between 2000 and 2003. Pantheon Books published the English translation in two volumes between 2003 and 2004. English and French publishers released the anthology edition in 2007.

portrays the complexities of female life in the Islamic Republic. Similarly, Satrapi's graphic memoir depicts a coming of age story molded by her intricate relationship to her identity and Iranian self. The two books, in their publication, educate American readers on Iranian society in the Islamic Republic, and employ elements of social development in the early 2000s.

Though there are many distinguished texts written by diasporic Iranian female writers, I have chosen these two texts because of their popularity in Western countries as well as their placement in terms of political and literary discourse. It is also important to note that while there is an abundance of male Iranian writers who present their texts within a Western context, for my interests, I focus on Iranian writers who identify as female. Ancient Persian culture lies at the root of modern Iranian society; however, a tumultuous mixture of Western influence, regime change, and religious shifts has influenced Iranian politics and identity. As a result, many authors of diasporic Iranian literature focus their works on the effects these shifts in society and politics had on their life in Iran and their host countries. To provide an accurate depiction of the implications of my chosen texts in an American context, I must first supply some background on the causes of migration for many Iranians in the 1900s.

I. The Notorious R's: Revolution and Regime Change in 20th Century Iran

While many are familiar with the outcomes of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the underlying causes and effects of this revolution interlace with Iranian identity and history. It is in this phenomenon that stories of Iranian life during the revolutionary period appeal to foreign readers since many aspects of Iranian society are still largely

unknown among general international audiences. Origins of civil unrest in Iran trace back to the early 1900s, with the nationalist uprisings against the Qajar dynasty in 1905 (Katouzian xv). In the period directly following, a series of changes in leadership and regime type left Iranian society with civil unrest and autocratic rule. Though this period is essential to the events leading up to the revolution, the legitimacy of the 1979 Iranian Revolution was arguably established in the 1940s.

The early 1940s introduced Iran to a time of societal and cultural change, instigated by a shift in regime. In 1941, an Allied invasion of Iran led to the resignation of Reza Shah, the first monarch of Iran to rule after the Qajar dynasty, and the succession of his more liberal son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.²As the British and United States governments supported the new Pahlavi, his rule in Iran aimed to rebuild the country with a Western-influenced liberal climate. While this was proceeding, Marxist Iranians, who spread communist propaganda throughout Iran, established pro-Soviet separatist regimes in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan.

The Shah succeeded in driving the Soviet Union out of the separatist areas by 1946 and utilized military force to exile those who attended these meetings (“Persepolis: Iran Time Line” 2010). In 1951, Mohammad Mosadegh, the leader of the pro-democracy National Front, was elected prime minister, and his first success as an Iranian leader was nationalizing the oil industry (Katouzian xv). This nationalization was seen as a pushback to Western countries, as the British and other Western governments previously owned a majority of the oil in most Middle Eastern countries. According to Shirin Neshat, producer of the *Women Without Men* film adaptation (2010) many Iranian scholars, elites,

² This section relies on the research and commentary of Homa Katouzian’s *Iran: Politics, History, and Literature* (2013)

and citizens embraced Mossaddegh and his narrative because he promoted a “secular society, where there was some idea of democracy and freedom” (“A Conversation With Shirin Neshat” par. 9). One may notice that this notion is not far from most Western ideologies, yet the political agenda of Western countries and government corruption altered Iran’s social development, ultimately causing a shift in the country’s principles.

Mossaddegh was unable to reach an oil settlement with the British, as he was overthrown in 1953 by a CIA-organized coup (Katouzian xvi). This act solidified the rift between Iranians in support of the Shah’s regime and those demanding change. Nonetheless, the coup was heavily reported in the United States and many described the event as manned exclusively by Iranian citizens. A *New York Times* article written by Kennett Love in 1953 states, “Iranians loyal to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, including civilians, soldiers, and rural tribesmen, swept Premier Mohammed Mossaddegh out of power today” (Aug. 20, 1953). While the coup consisted mostly of those opposed to Mossaddegh in Iran, the complete erasure of the CIA’s involvement demonstrates how the United States wanted to portray Iranians as the sole cause of political turmoil. Western governments were heavily involved in Iran’s political sphere, and the reluctance to acknowledge such involvement illustrates the combative rhetoric spread among Western countries about Middle Eastern states, such as Iran. Literary endeavors by Anglophone Iranian authors challenge this account of Iranian society and reflect upon the coup’s collective damage on many Iranians for continuing generations.

After Mossadegh's elimination in 1953, Shah Pahlavi, who had previously fled the country, returned to establish a pro-Western dictatorship.³ With this new government, Mohammad Reza Shah began the White Revolution, in which he founded important principles such as land reform and women's right to vote. Since the previous Shah banned the hijab and other traditional clothing in Iran, Mohammad Reza relaxed the ban and deemed them no longer an offence. While the regime displayed a positive step towards the elevation of women's rights and liberties, the presence of corruption within the administration led to the dissatisfaction of Iranian citizens. Moreover, the decline of Iranian agriculture and other facets of the economy affected many Iranians and further heightened societal frustration. As the sociopolitical and economic state of Iran deteriorated, groups of citizens protested against the Iranian state, including some following the activism of the popular cleric known as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Western-influenced state angered conservative Iranians and the corruption of Shah Pahlavi's regime expanded the protests and grew to create what became internationally known as the Iranian Revolution.

By the late 1970s, Iranians witnessed an increase in systematic violence towards anti-government demonstrations. To combat the swelling protests and anti-Shah rhetoric, Shah Pahlavi utilized his powerful CIA trained military force, known as the SAVAK, to enact brutal mass killings against protestors and Shi'a clergy ("Persepolis: Iran Time Line" 2010). Those who frequented these events were in danger of death and imprisonment for speaking out against the regime, which drove many to escape the country and rebuild their lives. On September 8, 1978, the Shah's notorious SAVAK

³ This section relies heavily on research Homa Katouzian's *Iran: Politics, History, and Literature* (2013)

fired on 20,000 pro-opposition protestors in Tehran's Jaleh Square, and killed between 400 and 900 people; the day is historically deemed as "Black Friday" ("Iran: One Revolution at a Time" 2011). These types of massacres only exacerbated the Shah's negative image and created a barrier of blood between Iranians and their government. Millions of Iranians were involved in this revolution, and the turmoil impacted not only Iranian contemporaries but also generations to come.

After years of mass killings of political opponents and demonstrators, Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran and the growth of these protests prompted the resignation of the Shah; the new regime, established by Khomeini, became known as the Islamic Republic (Katouzian xvii). This newly founded Iranian state consisted of theocratic rule and led to the transformation of Iranian society into one driven by religious fundamentalism. The United States was quickly forced into direct interaction with the new Iranian government. In November of 1979, a mass of Iranian citizens, mainly students, stormed the US embassy in Tehran and held its employees hostage for 444 days (*National Archives and Records Administration*). The captives were eventually released, but the American view of Iran turned from slight apprehension to direct hostility. Subsequently, the United States aided Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein in the lengthy Iran-Iraq war (Katouzian xvii). Those who supported the war, including the United States, added to the foundation of an antagonistic narrative that continues to surround Iran today.

Though the Islamic Republic was supported for its defeat of the Shah's dictatorship, its forced enactment of fundamentalist-backed laws created another wave of Iranian migration. New regulations included the revamping of school texts, the establishment of a forceful religious militia known as the "Hezbollah" and the mandate of

the required veil, which reshaped the relationships between Iranian citizens and their government (“Persepolis: Iran Time Line 2010). The new regime’s religious police frequently enacted the same forms of violence against those who did not support Islamic fundamentalism that the previous Shah forced on citizens before the revolution. Many describe these laws and punishments as an attempt to isolate Iran from the Western influence that controlled the previous government; however, in doing so, secular citizens and others who did not support religious fundamentalism were oppressed by the same government that overthrew the former leader. With hypocrisy and corruption unbearable, many Iranians fled, and continue to flee, to Western countries in search of an autonomous environment. This flood of migrants, and those who escaped before and during the revolution, formed what is known as the present Iranian Diaspora. Literature, particularly diasporic Iranian literature, addresses the psychological and physical effects of boisterous political movement and changes in space for those Iranians who had to leave their home.

II. A Brief History of Iranian Anglophone Literature

Persian literature is the most prized flower in Iran’s perennial garden of history and culture. The works of innumerable poets, writers, and freethinkers shape Iranian identity and epitomize the deep alliance between Persian art and society. According to Homa Katouzian, “[Persian literature is] the greatest single contribution of Iran to human civilization” (*Iran: Politics, History, and Literature 2013*). Because of this deep integration of literature into Iranian identity, those who contribute to the art, in the diasporic Iranian community, represent and embrace their cultural persona in its purest form. Anglophone Iranian literature serves to display Iranian culture in a way that is

accessible to both non-Iranian readers and Iranians living in the diaspora who were unable to learn Farsi. With this accessibility, Iranians reshape their narrative and express the beauty of Persian culture to those with little to no education on the subject.

While diasporic Iranian literature, particularly Iranian women's memoirs, increased in popularity and scope in the 2000s, the origins of Anglophone Iranian literature date back to the 1900s.⁴ Early pioneers of this form can be traced back to the 1950s, when Najme Najafi released her books, *Persia Is My Heart* (1953) and its sequel *Reveille for A Persian Village* (1958), which both focus on the fictitious life of a young Iranian woman who moves to California in the 1950s and returns to Iran to establish an all-female factory (Najafi 1953, 1958). Following Najafi, Freyduun Esfandiari continued the art form in his novels, *The Day of Sacrifice* (1959), *The Beggar* (1965), and *Identity* (1966). And at the onset of the Iranian Revolution, a larger group of educated and aristocratic writers, including Donne Raffat and Nahid Rachlin, emerged into the literary community. Despite the presence of Anglophone Iranian literature in Iranian history, the form was not established as a distinct body of literature until a few decades after the mass migration of Iranians from the revolution.

Before the early 2000s, there was little to no scholarship on Anglophone Iranian writing; however, with the increase of American interest in narratives from the Middle East, following 9/11, numerous scholars such as Mahmood Karimi-Hakkak, Negar Mottahahedeh, Babak Osanloo, and others published essays and chapters regarding Iranian writing in the diaspora. As a result of this, groups of diasporic Iranian writers, such as Persis Karim, established institutions such as the Association of Iranian American

⁴ This section relies heavily on the writing and research of Sanaz Fotouhi's *The Literature of The Iranian Diaspora: Meaning and Identity* (2015)

Writers and the International Society for Iranian Studies, which gave many emerging diasporic Iranian writers the space to showcase their writing and build a literary community of Iranian writers and readers outside of Iran. As of 2016, there were over 300 published pieces of Anglophone diasporic Iranian literature (Fotouhi, “Tales of exile and home: Iranian diaspora in literature”). This emerging body of Iranian literature not only founded the voice of Iranian identity for non-Farsi speakers but also served many purposes for the writers themselves.

Forced to leave their home as a result of regime change and imposing violence, those living in a diaspora often have issues with self-agency, identity, and a sense of belonging.⁵ Particularly in English speaking countries, such as the United States, the negative rhetoric surrounding Iran in the late 1900s (and still today), made it difficult for some Iranians integrate themselves into society and establish their own identity.

According to Fotouhi, “for many diasporic Iranian writers, writing has become a means to regain their sense of identity and make themselves visible against the backdrop of this negative history” (13). Writing, as an act, can be therapeutic in its narrative release.

Nonetheless, with the establishment of a diasporic community, future Iranian writers can emphasize their persona among other authors with their unique and individual stories.

Furthermore, the decision to write in English for migrant Iranian writers has several implications for how different members of the diaspora highlight their identities and how they want their stories to be perceived.

Many Iranian writers in diaspora, such as Shahrnush Parsipur, Goli Taraghi, and Bozorg Alavi, only write in Persian and aim exclusively at reaching Persian-speaking

⁵ This sections also relies heavily on the writing and research of Sanaz Fotouhi’s *The Literature of The Iranian Diaspora: Meaning and Identity* (2015)

audiences. While this decision raises its own assumptions, writers who chose to publish their work in English represent intersections between literature and culture. By making their words available to an English speaking audience, Iranian writers establish their voices in a new community and display their hybrid identities. Furthermore, the use of English, as a dominant colonial language, can also be seen as a tool of resistance towards the oppressive narrative established by English speaking countries on many Eastern cultures. In utilizing the dominant language in their new host countries, Iranians in the diaspora can address negative stereotypes and reconstruct their own identities in direct communication with English speaking audiences (Fotouhi 2015). The use of English is a chance for diasporic Iranians to develop themselves in their community and combat negative rhetoric surrounding their home country.

Anglophone Iranian writers transfer an aspect of their identity within social spaces and emphasize the connection between art and migrant identities. Since Iran's culture is so rooted in literature and art, the ability for Iranians in the diaspora to publish their work provides agency in their host countries. For those who live in countries such as the United States, with a politically negative view of Iran, the publication of their unique and individual stories serves as reassurance for Iranian identity and self-assurance. The use of English as a language directly communicates to those who view Iran in a negative light and helps to integrate Iranian migrants into their new society. But perhaps the most critical aspect of Anglophone Iranian literature is that it reaches the portion of diasporic Iranians who are still impacted by the effects of migration but cannot speak Farsi. These bodies of work provide younger generations of diasporic Iranians, who struggle to

communicate with their grandparents and loved ones, a chance to understand their movement and heritage.

III. Chapters Outlined

As I've discussed, Iran underwent several political and social changes within the span of a few decades. Shifts in regime and society are not unfamiliar for Iranians, since historically the nation has witnessed many changes in regime due to arbitrary rule. However, the presence of foreign intervention, as well as the impacting violence enacted by a corrupted government not only affected the Iranian population but altered Iranian identity. Though a particularly tragic history for those who are forced to leave, Iranians maintained their agency and established a diasporic community in their host countries. As a result of and to further develop this community, Iranians in the diaspora published their stories and created a literary body for scholarly and general discussions. These migrant writers, particularly women, codified their voices and reshaped their own identities in diaspora. This piece serves not only to show how exilic Iranian women's memoirs distinctly appeal to the American readership of the 2000s, but to also emphasize how their works instigated a public conversation of reshaping Middle Eastern narratives.

In the first chapter, I discuss the social and political events that transpired in the early 2000s, and I describe the psychological and social effects of these events on American audiences and society. The September 11, 2001 attacks, in particular, were a shifting moment for American politics and identity. The effects of these attacks not only instigated a change in literary focus but also impacted the American sense of identity. Concurring with the attacks, technological advancements in communication such as the

rise of the Internet directly changed how Americans seek, perceive and interact with information about other cultures. These changes promoted the spread of global literature and reconstructed personal connections with public and private identities. Lastly, Western audiences of the 2000s witnessed the spread of a third wave of feminism that recognized female experiences within different intersections of culture, class, religions, and more. Within this chapter, I correlate these coinciding sociopolitical changes in American society with the subsequent appeal of diasporic Iranian stories, and discuss the debates surrounding Islamic feminism and its portrayal at the time of Nafisi's and Satrapi's publications.

The next two chapters serve as case studies of two of the most popular diasporic Iranian women's memoirs: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*. In my analysis, I apply the cultural changes described in the previous chapter to specific illustrations in the texts. For *Reading Lolita*, I find that several aspects such as her inclusion of a book club, her portrayal of public and private female identities, and her representations of young Iranian women appeal directly to characteristics of American society that particularly arise during the early 2000s. In my discussion of *The Complete Persepolis*, I assert that Satrapi's Bildungsroman-esque graphic novel interacts with the post 9/11 American readership in several spheres as well. Her depictions of space and memory, as well as a portrayal of feminine identity in different intersections of society, correlate with the social transformations of American culture in the period it was released. In consideration of the two works, as they contribute to my argument, the two authors have outwardly different experiences in Iran, but their

discussion of key personal and collective identities appeal to American audiences in their emerging global society.

As with many countries, government corruption and foreign interference repeatedly constrain Iranian society. However, Iran's deep layers of history and culture continuously break through these restraints and develop into artistry capable of impacting entire nations. The celebration of Iranian women and their stories do not require an explanation—the beauty and integrity of their work stand on its own. However, in observing a culture that historically shuts out and suppresses foreign and minority voices, such as in America, one questions how Iranian women were able to push against such barriers and establish their voices. To try and provide an account of the context in which these works were released is to display the progress and cultural growth Iranian women have pioneered in America. In this piece, I demonstrate how the work of diasporic Iranian female writers directly appeal to the American audience in the early 2000s and push to inform a change of rhetoric towards Middle Eastern cultures.

CHAPTER 1: America's Expanding Society

A divisive election, a traumatic attack, a war on insurgency, and a devastating hurricane—such were the events that introduced America to the 21st century. Within this cluster of catastrophic incidents, trauma, isolation, and patriotism outwardly permeated the atmosphere. Internally, the chaos that marked America's early 2000s created a contrary development. In response to terrorism and destruction, tech advancement and well-established social movements created a welcoming space for foreign authors to release their work. Aside from the outward hatred of the Middle East, the American literary landscape witnessed a rise in Middle Eastern authors. Iranian women, in particular, captivated the marketplace by documenting their lives in Iran, during a period of contention. American readers were given a direct insight to a world rarely portrayed in a realistic and positive light; nonetheless, the (mostly) affirmative reaction to these works suggests that the post 9/11 readership had a much more intricate connection to these texts than it would seem. In this chapter, I examine the sociopolitical context of the early 2000s American reader and establish a relationship between said reader and diasporic Iranian female memoirs.

I. 9/11's Lasting Effects

In the period amidst the Iranian Revolution and the release of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), the United States witnessed a variety of progressions in popular culture, politics, and literature. Within two years of the twenty-first century, America experienced its first terrorist attacks, and instigated a "Global War on Terrorism" (2001-2008). This declaration of war further deteriorated the already wavering relationship between the United States and the Middle East. Following the incident, President George Bush declared, "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (Bush 2001). While epitomizing the "us vs. them" mentality between the West and the Middle East, Bush created a social and political barrage against Middle Eastern cultures and religious beliefs. According to an FBI report publicized by *The Washington Post*, Anti-Islamic hate crimes rose to 5 times their appearance in the years following 9/11 (Ingraham 2015). Given this adverse American reaction, one would reason that Middle Eastern authors might refrain from releasing their works, in fear of backlash or hatred. However, in the five years following the attacks, American publication houses published no less than eighteen Anglophone Iranian memoirs, most written by Iranian women (Acho 2013). These works captivated American audiences, revealing that the September 11, 2001 attacks impacted American society on a multidimensional level.

Iranian writers were not the only Middle Easterners dominating the bestsellers lists in the 2000s—many notable works such as Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (it debuted at #1 in the country in 2007) and Susan Albuha's *Mornings in Jenin* (2006), also enthralled American readers and won many awards for their literary endeavors. This popularity, in part, is arguably due to the American audience's peaked interests in international literature following the attacks. A

recent article published in *The Washington Post* (2018) outlines the success of foreign works after September 11, 2001. According to Liesl Schillinger, “The 9/11 attacks disrupted complacency and turned the American gaze outward” (2018). Schillinger’s research implies that American readers turned to foreign literature as a way to cope with the trauma of the attacks. The word “complacency” (Schillinger 2018) suggests that American’s previously lacked interest in foreign works because of their contentment with isolation. In search of outward explanations, Americans would view foreign literature as examples of a broader human experience.

Moreover, the attacks symbolize a turning point in American history, when America no longer was exempt from the destruction ensuing in other countries. The event physically crossed American borders, a phenomenon that rarely occurred in its developed history, leaving American society in a vulnerable state. This readership did not just seek foreign literature as a form of illumination; it sought artistry that reflected upon the lack of security and breach of identity that the attacks evoked. Emphasizing a loss of security, many popular Anglophone Iranian works focus on the emotional, psychological, and physical effects of the revolution. The multiple regime changes affected both political and social spheres. You may recall from my introduction that after Shah Pahlavi was reinstated, he started a White Revolution in which he encouraged civil rights and women’s liberties. However, when the new Islamic Republic was established, the government enforced strict laws on society, primarily focusing on women’s outward appearances and interactions. Aside from the psychological harms of witnessing violence and destruction in their home country, Iranian women were not assured of their agency. Thus, their stories regarding how they felt during this tumultuous era, and how they

reflect upon their migrations, partially mimic the insecurity of Americans after the attacks.

Additionally, the spread of political isolationism inadvertently caused a normalization of foreign literature in the American market by response, which furthers the notion of an outward search for experience. To underscore this point, 2003 marked the time when three American women founded the magazine *Words Without Borders*, where they hoped to “create an antidote to xenophobia and nationalism” in publishing translated foreign works (Schillinger 20). In creating this organization as a response to President Bush’s famous statement, the pioneers stressed an alternative social option to combat identity and security issues. The increasing demand for foreign fiction and the desire to translate foreign works implies that many Americans at the time sought a social anecdote to political isolationism and instead turned towards cross-cultural development.

The magazine’s contribution to the increased awareness of foreign experiences aided in shifting American culture towards a literary form of transnational communication. In fact, since its beginning, *Words Without Borders* “has published literary translations online by more than 2,200 writers from 134 countries (as of 2018)...[and] more independent presses devoted to international literature followed: Europa Editions, in 2005; Open Letter Books, in 2008...” (Schillinger 3). American deviation from the administration’s proposal implies a societal shift towards foreign interaction. With this increase of translated works, the market opened up for Middle Eastern writers such as Satrapi to spread their stories. Though this 9/11 effect does not directly correlate with the rise in specifically diasporic Iranian memoirs, it implies a

developing flexibility amidst the collective American gaze that formerly may not have prevailed.

Aside from its inadvertent push towards foreign exposure, September 11, 2001, caused a psychological effect amongst Americans that interplayed between feelings of identity and privacy.⁶ According to Anne Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Queen in their “Introduction: Representing 9/11: Literature and Resistance” from the collective titled *Literature After 9/11*, literature tackling the events of 9/11 and the American public align closely to the idea of the personal and public witness (2008). This explains the phenomenon where Americans were closely interested in juxtapositions between those who witnessed the attacks via televisions or other media outlets and those who were at the scene when the attacks happened. Within this sphere, Americans struggled in recognizing the “spectacle” between the private realm of memory and the public sphere of history. It is in this effect that Americans were drawn more specifically to diasporic Iranian literature. The key aspect of American readers in their response to 9/11 is how they dealt with the notions of time, witness, loss, and privacy. Those who indirectly experienced loss in the attack encountered similar emotional triggers to those who had a direct impact from the tragedy.

Since the attacks burst the figurative and physical American bubble, the American witness sought out literature that reflected upon these feelings of insecurity, shifts in identity and personal/public relations. As a result of the consistent government and ideological instability in Iran, diasporic Iranian literature is the perfect combination of reflection and the survival of these effects. Furthermore, many Iranian writers

⁶ The following section relies heavily on the research of Anne Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn in their collective entitled *Literature After 9/11*

deliberately replicate the past in their work, sometimes even changing some aspects, in such a way as to undertake a desired future (Fotouhi 2015). In this way, Iranian writers utilize public spectacle as a means to focus on instigating change in society. Americans dealing with the conflict between memory and reality, as they appear in public and private spaces, can read their works as a guide for how to operate history and look forward from the traumatic event.

While the 9/11 attacks affected American identity as the private/public witness, literature released after the incident also served a primary role in reconstructing the American identity.⁷ A key characteristic of terrorist attacks among other insurgencies is their intended psychological affect on a large audience, and the coverage of these attacks further publicized this emotional trauma. Furthermore, in a mass-mediated society, where any groundbreaking incident is widely exposed and profited upon, it is difficult to separate oneself from the public observer. Though one may not have experienced the physical pain of the attacks, the lasting psychological effects present themselves. This struggle for a distinction between witness and participant is the defining component of identity that post 9/11 American readers seek to resolve.

Literature, as an art form, repairs this harm in that it illustrates the interconnectedness between individuals and society, reaffirming the notion of feeling and seeing without firsthand experience. In the later chapters, I will examine more closely the relationship between the personal/private witness and the appeal of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis*, seeking to correlate Iranian female experiences to the private/public dimension. To provide a distinction between diasporic Iranian memoirs

⁷ Ibid. 123-125

and other foreign literature, the stories of those who witnessed violence and mass killings often have issues separating themselves from the entirety of the revolution. Women, in particular, experienced societal shifts, in which the way they presented themselves in society was constantly transformed by systematic regulation. In having these experiences, diasporic Iranian writers discuss the separation between the personal and political and how to repair the effects of a tragic societal displacement.

II. The Rise of The Internet: A Social Development

Additionally, the period directly following 9/11 witnessed a positive technological transformation of both American and global society. By the year 2000, around 100 million people had access to the Internet, and three years later, in 2003, the world's first popular social media site, MySpace, emerged in the public eye (Merrell). With this introduction to social media, Americans gained direct access to those living in foreign states, and immediately, the distribution of information shifted—expanding knowledge of other people's lifestyles. While seemingly positive in comparison to the devastating 9/11 attacks, the rise of the Internet also impacted American readership on a multidimensional level.

As social media developed in the early 2000s, Americans were introduced to three modes of intercultural communication.⁸ First, social media broadened communication between individuals and groups with similar interests; these groups could promote literature, music, movies, etc. or serve as a place for discussion and debate. The

⁸ The information in the following section relies on research from Dalia Prakapienė and Romas Prakapas' article, "The Impact of Social Media on Intercultural Communication" (2016)

effects of this form of communication and the influence of these groups will be expanded upon later in the chapter, but it is important to note that they contribute to feelings of self-satisfaction and belonging for those who feel isolated. Secondly, social media became the primary tool for accessing information, learning about diverse opinions, and providing direct access to news and cultural developments. And lastly, social media served as an instrument in socialization, since communication within social networking sites provides access to individuals without having direct interaction. Thus, this social space encouraged people to discuss current events and share ideas with those in different areas, while still satisfying those who dislike face-to-face interaction. As a result of these recent approaches to communication, social spheres and global interaction began promoting a multi-dimensional approach to embracing foreign cultures, as dialogue between cultures happens regularly and often unwittingly.

In addition to the rise of social media websites, the early 2000s created a social phenomenon known as blog culture or the blogosphere. According to a joint study conducted by the American Life Project and Pew Internet (a subgroup of the Pew Research Center), “The Study of Blogging” (2005), by 2004, 32 million Americans said they read blogs; furthermore, the growth of blog culture proliferated, and by the end of 2004 blog readership rose by 58%. Blogs were used primarily for new sources and to spread mainstream media ideas; conversely, many people utilized blogs to cover their personal opinions, gossip, or general information about popular social events. With the addition of social media sites, blogging became accessible to a wide range of people, and blog culture fully integrated itself into social and political spheres.

For Iranians, the blogosphere significantly impacted the spread of information between those in the diaspora and those still living in Iran. According to Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany in their *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (2010), the wave of Iranian bloggers started when Hossein Derakhshan created a how-to manual, in 2001, for Iranians to start their blogs and undermine government censorship in Iran (32). In the following years, there were an estimated 400,000-700,000 Iranian blogs, and Farsi became one of the leading languages of the blogosphere, frequently named Blogistan. This phenomenon increased the share of Persian material, in Farsi and other languages, online. Iranians in diaspora quickly and overwhelmingly grasped the chance to discuss politics, music, art, and have daily conversations with people in Iran, while expressing their ideas and culture to the general public. Iranian women, in particular, took the blogosphere to a new dimension and created shared spaces for Iranian (and non-Iranian) women, on a global scale, to discuss conflicts of gender and politics in society.

Following a strong history of political activism, Iranian women, in Iran and diaspora, created collective blogs to provide spaces for regular discussion of “the enrichment of equal gender relation” (Noushin Ahmadi Khorsani qt. in Sreberny and Khiabany 108). The website Maydaan, for example, contains more than 20 articles engaging with the issue of the 1979 UN CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Contributions include international coverage of struggles by women across the globe and passionate voices commenting on the need to institutionalize global women’s rights (Sreberny and Khiabany 109). In doing so, Iranian women created a global female space to tackle issues of gender discrimination in all countries. These discussions parallel the publication of Iranian female memoirs and

provide readers with a non-literary example of Iranian feminist discussion. Though Blogistan mainly affected those connected to Iran, the spread of Middle Eastern ideas during a time of social upheaval paralleled the literary explosion of Iranian memoirs. Americans who seek more information about the stories of these Iranian women and a more current discussion of Iran could easily find answers online about a people previously described as evil.

As Internet communication developed, the public's view of art and literature changed in how people approached and processed stories. Though book clubs emerged in society before the social media age, their size and sphere of influence formerly remained limited to those who were in the book club and the surrounding community. This rhetoric changed, however, when famous American talk show host, Oprah Winfrey, introduced audiences to her ongoing Oprah book club, in 1996. According to Cecilia Konchar Farr. in her work, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed The Way America Reads* (2005), Oprah changed the way readers placed values on books by emphasizing her mantra to trust readers in the general public. This rhetoric positively affected Iranian literature, as Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has a success widely attributed to its book club presence; in fact, the title is also on Oprah's online book club. Oprah's development spread the rhetoric of a national book club and encouraged many at-home readers to start their own online spaces for literary discussion.

With Oprah's mass popularity and influence, any book she placed in her book club led to "instant fame and bestseller status for [the] authors" (Farr. 2005). Following Oprah's approach, many celebrities, news sites, and online forums decidedly started their book clubs, encouraging literary discussion. Intriguingly, book clubs consist of a largely

female audience, claiming as many as five to ten million female readers nationwide, according to Elizabeth Long in her 2003 study, *Book Clubs: Women and The Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (qt. in Depaul 2008). This element of female inclusivity highlights the book clubber's appeal to female written works, providing a space for female authors to feel more welcomed in the American marketplace—a possible explanation for the uneven ratio of Iranian female to male memoirs released and popularized in the early 2000s. Coupling this with the global blogging phenomenon, people in different regions could recommend and review literature and other entertainment.

Furthermore, since the global book club was established, online book clubs and book review sites have taken over the market. In 2006, the social book cataloging website, “Goodreads,” debuted and added another element to online literary discussions.⁹ Readers were now able to generate catalogs and reading lists publicly, and at the same time, they could spread their book suggestions, ratings, reviews, and blogs. As a member of this website, I often receive emails that promote renowned and newly released works for each month; these book recommendations are meant to introduce readers to genres of literature they may not often read. Through these member-wide emails, the website promotes diversity in writing and pushes the modern reader to find works they would not have otherwise known. Though the two texts I have chosen published their work in America before the release of this website, the collective and diverse mindset of the site defined American audiences in the early 2000s.

⁹ The Goodreads discussion in this section relies heavily on the information of Goodread's Wikipedia page: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodreads> and my interaction with the website.

The development of social networking and its lasting effects on communication and readership explain how the 2000s American reader would find foreign literature and its popularization. With the releases of Myspace (2003), Facebook (2004), and Youtube (2005), social media dominated American interactions. These new additions to society implemented the ability to make individual accounts, create public personas, and generate online groups. In doing so, individuals create their own digital identity. Stacey Koosel defines the digital identity “as an assumed online identity...seen as the manipulation of a kaleidoscope of selves tailored to fit into different environments and roles online” (*The Regenotiated Self: Social Media’s Effect on Identity* 2015). Though digital personas were not as prominent in the early stages of social networking as they are today, the implications of a public and private “self” relay a key trait of the 2000s American reader. In a literary context, the “timeless, pan-cultural idea of the story and the storyteller are intertwined in digital identity narratives, where the storyteller may be in the story itself” (Koosel 61). Furthermore, digital identities can cross multiple forms of communication. Those who create their public persona are telling a story in which they also play a role, but that role fits the environment in which they are publicizing themselves. Drawing upon the concurrent development of the public and private witness, the digital identity epitomizes an American society trapped between public and private spheres.

Though the concept of a digital identity seemingly has little connection to the popularity of Iranian female memoirs in 2000s America, the creation of this identity and its role in American society relates directly to shifts in Iranian identity during and after the 20th century. Blog and social media culture focus on the desire for individual expression and global self-presentation, and in doing so, they create a collective in which

migrant and native-borne Americans can find their identities through cross-cultural discussion. Similarly, the culture and identity of most Iranians transformed, as the country experienced multiple ideological and regime changes. Those in particular who fled the country and now live in the diaspora, feel this effect, as they no longer live in the place their identities were formed. The stories of Iranians heavily reflect upon the discrepancy between their public and private personas, while they present themselves in a new society. Furthermore, as you will see in the following chapters, many Iranians hid their private selves as a form of survival. It is in this public presentation that the post 9/11 American can find familiarity.

As the 2000s American reader adjusts to the new cyberspace, identity consciousness and transformation became critical aspects of society. The rise of the Internet promotes new modes of communication that can be applied to a developing collective mindset among Americans and the broader global society. Iranians in diaspora witnessed this presence and strengthened their voices among the blogosphere, which created a social space for intercultural discussion of politics, gender relations, and more. American readers, seeking foreign interaction, now had information about Iran and other Middle Eastern countries in several different social sources. The creation of an online book club space expanded the social media surge and provided isolated readers with national and global book recommendations and debates. Female majority book clubs are a familiar mode for Americans to discuss literature, and adding an online expansion to the book club community strengthens female literary debates and diversifies opinions. The appeal of Iranian, specifically female, memoirs can be explained by the broadening mindset of Americans in this time period, since interpersonal communication became

increasingly convenient. Furthermore, the identity shifts that arise as a result of this new social society parallel identity issues for those having to acclimate to their migrant persona. Authors like Nafisi and Satrapi tackle these identity issues, and their publication reflects on a growingly global outlook.

III. A New Wave

With the introduction of social media and new forms of intercultural communication, social and political movements began steering towards more inclusive discussions. A few years before the new century, Rebecca Walker reportedly established a new feminist movement by stating, “I am the Third Wave” (qt. in Snyder 2008). In this movement, scholars and readers began discussing how to eliminate the barriers of the previous feminist movements and shift dialogues towards a more inclusive stance. Furthermore, literature and pop culture pushed for the eradication of distinct definitions of identity, and moved to include those with varying class, gender, ethnic, etc., backgrounds (Snyder 2008). As the third wave began expanding among common spaces, American readers and audiences turned towards literature and genres that would be reflective of that inclusivity.

Subsequently, the stories of women and those living in other countries strengthened in popularity and encouraged new writers. Iranian memoirs capture different levels of inclusivity as they deal with religion, culture, ethnicity, class, and sociopolitical norms. Additionally, the push for an expansion of identities increased the demand for literature that celebrates individualism, while still emphasizing a safe space for intercultural conversations (Snyder 2008). The introduction of this third wave feminist

movement, along with the layers of trauma and intercultural communication marks American readers of the early 2000s. As the third wave concept of feminism popularized among American feminist thinkers and activists, individual's stories served as a form of raising consciousness to the movement. According to Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar in their "The rhetorical functions of consciousness-raising in third wave feminism" (2009), personal testimony, promoted among previous feminist movements, functioned as a form of third wave advertisement due to its diversity in narratives. Though formally told within day-to-day discussions, the digital age led to a more public space for personal stories. The memoir, in this case, would serve as a distinct form of consciousness raising, because of its ability to expose gendered stories of a society through a first-person perspective. In examining the purpose of Anglophone Iranian memoirs, the stories of Iranian women's gendered experiences inform a populace otherwise unable to understand Middle Eastern femininity truly. Furthermore, as Sowards and Renegar note, personal testimonies can connect the lives of individuals who underwent similar experiences, in a different context (542). Thus, an American woman may not undergo the specific incidents of Satrapi or Nafisi's lives but can understand the impact through the narrative form, and in this way, the private individual becomes a public informer.

In considering the effects of the third wave of feminism on the American reader, Middle Eastern stories, released after 9/11, attract American audiences in their cultural exposure. However, it is important to note that Iranian, as well as other Middle Eastern, feminists contributed to the appeal in their emerging rhetoric. Nima Naghibi suggests in her *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism And Iran* (2007) that post 9/11

nationalism caused the merging of liberal feminism and xenophobia (141). Stemming from George Bush's isolationist policies and the subsequent hatred towards Muslims, Naghibi finds that the western ideals of "global sisterhood" conjured a "white savior" complex in which Muslim women needed saving from their oppressive patriarchy. As Naghibi describes, instead of identifying the perspectives of Iranian women, Western feminists historically viewed their situation as one in which they need saving, emphasizing the aggressive "other" that has been applied to Eastern cultures by the West. An example of this is when Oprah Winfrey publicly unveiled Zoya, a representative of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) in February of 2001 (Naghibi 142). Since Oprah is a legendary figure in American pop culture, her public unveiling emphasized the notion of oppressed Muslim women and discredited the work of Islamic feminists. Naghibi ultimately argues for a space for the Middle East in postcolonial studies and feminism (145), which *Persepolis* has been accredited for portraying. Naghibi's work does not discount the ideals of Western third wave feminists but illustrates how Islamic feminists and other feminists of color have argued throughout history for the recognition of women's experiences across classes and ethnicities.

In addition to Naghibi, in her Iranian perspective, feminists of other Islamic states commented on the lack of space for Muslim women in popular feminist discourse and insist upon the visibility of Muslim women's activism in developing feminist movements. A debated topic, Islamic feminist scholars, such as Saba Mahmood and Sherin Saadallah, use their work to broaden intellectual horizons and complicate secular ideals of female agency and religious boundaries. In her work *Politics of Piety* (2005), Mahmood, a Pakistani anthropologist, asserts a new ideal of feminist theory that re-examines the

relationship between gender and religion. The work reveals an empowering perspective of women who participate within patriarchal systems and proposes another angle of the approach to feminist studies of identity, agency, and embodiment among religious systems. Her work, among others of the time, highlights Islamic feminine identity and the complexities of a social feminist movement that embodies different spectrums of progressive ideals. In doing so, Mahmood provides audiences with an alternative perspective to traditional third wave feminist debates and expands the concept of intersectionality. Sherin Saadallah also assesses the connection between the third wave movement and Islamic feminism in her *Muslim Feminism in the Third Wave: A Reflective Inquiry* (*Third Wave Feminism* pp 216-226 2004). In her examination, she defines the multiple categories of feminist activity in Muslim societies; she references Azza Karam's *Women, Islamisms, and the State* (1998) and describes the categories as:

1. "Secular Feminism—a discourse grounded outside religion and engaged with international human rights.
2. Islamist feminism—a discourse emerging from the socially and intellectually conservative Islamist movement...
3. Muslim Feminism—a discourse engaging with Islamic sources while reconciling Islamic faith with international human rights (218)."

In identifying the different definitions of Islamic feminisms, Saadallah highlights the heterogeneity of Islamic cultures and the spectrum of identities for feminist activists.

While highlighting the feats of Islamic women living in a theocratic state, Islamic

feminists of the early 2000s strengthened their voices among third wave feminists and encouraged a “rethinking” (Naghibi) of global feminist approaches.

With consideration of my two chosen texts, I must also refer to the debate surrounding Islamic feminism both in Western societies and within the Islamic states themselves. Though Islamic feminists prompted great achievements in civil liberties among theocratic states, many scholars from those states argue against the movement’s popularization. Iranians, in particular, have contending viewpoints on the topic, since the establishment of the fundamentalist Islamic Republic drove many Iranians to leave the state and imposed strict rules of female presentation. Valentine Moghadam describes the widely contentious argument among Iranians about the concept of Islamic feminism in his article “Islamic Feminism and Its Discontent: Toward a Resolution of the Debate” (2002). Iranian exilic scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi, Nayereh Tohidi, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini converse with elements of modern Iranian culture, such as the magazine *Zanaan*, which discuss gender discrimination issues in conjunction with traditionalist and religious values (1142). They argue that the Islamic feminist movement develops a dialogue between religious and secular feminists and that the process of the Islamic revolution empowered women in that it created a popular feminist consciousness (1145). In providing these arguments, scholars emphasize the legitimacy of Islamic feminism and its placement among a larger feminist discourse. However, critics of the movement like Haideh Moghissi argue that submitting to an Islamic political system only serves to strengthen the legitimacy of the system and further weaken the agency of Iranian women (1149). Furthermore, Moghissi and others assert that the emphasis on Islamic feminist achievements obscures the contribution of leftists and secularists who have historically

worked to combat Islamist repression in Iran and other Islamic states (1149). Since Iran is not a homogeneous society, as with most states, the emphasis on Islamic feminism undermines the work of many secular Iranian feminists in the country. In the following chapter, I will expand upon this argument in consideration of Azar Nafisi's view on Islamic feminism and what that portrays to the American audience.

Feminist discourse, in a broader sense, contains complex perspectives and identity discussion; however, the development of the third wave movement in Western societies implies a growing acknowledgment of the multifaceted spectra of female-gendered oppression and activism in the United States. The topic of Islamic feminism, among Western societies, remained previously undisclosed and overlooked; that being said, the emerging voices of Iranian women, and other Islamic scholars, educate and deliver a space for discussion and debate of a distinct aspect of global sisterhood. The popularity of Iranian female memoirs, during an era of strong anti-Islamic sentiment, implies an American interest in the experiences of Iranian women and their lives during a period of conflict and repression. The rise of scholarship surrounding Islamic feminism in the early 2000s, and continuing, provides readers with an accurate portrayal of the intricacies of gender and identity across diverse political and social spheres.

IV. Conclusion

As I continue the rest of my essay, I will refer back to this chapter in its layout of important sociopolitical events and developments that characterized American readers in the post 9/11 era. Though the American political administration under George W. Bush provoked nationalism and an "us vs. them" mentality, following the September 11

attacks, the lasting effects of trauma promoted an outward search of literature and art. The popularity of foreign literature, to this effect, implies a connection between American audiences and previously unfamiliar areas of literature. Furthermore, the rise of the digital age in the early 2000s facilitated a period for Americans of multi-dimensional communication. It is within this period that American readership transformed the way in which people promoted and read literature as a collective. Lastly, the late 1990s established a new wave of feminism that speaks directly to the popularity of international female works. Though the spread of Islamic feminism is contended, the popularity and message of the third wave of feminism implies a necessity for diverse experiences.

It is within these multidimensional contexts that post 9/11 Americans connect with the discourse between public and private identity that exemplifies Iranian female memoirs. In the following chapters, I will describe the current critical debates regarding the popularity of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Persepolis*, and provide an alternative explanation for their explosion in regards to their appeal amongst the above sociopolitical contexts, with specific attention to personal and public spheres.

Chapter 2: *Reading Lolita Under Attack*

“Stunning...a literary life raft on Iran’s fundamentalist sea...all readers should read it.”
—Margaret Atwood¹⁰

In 2003, Azar Nafisi released her highly acclaimed memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, a story of her life in Iran after the revolution. Titling each section of her story with a popular, and banned, Western novel, she describes her secret endeavor as a dream she decided to fulfill in an act of indulgence (Nafisi 1). As she sits with seven of her most devoted pupils, in her eclectic apartment, she critiques the oppressive and corrupt qualities of the current Iranian regime and parallels elements of Iranian women’s lives with those of the novels the group examines. Nafisi reflects upon the multiple transitions in her idea of self-assurance and identity, as a result of the constant conflict that undertook Iran, internally and externally, before she inevitably left her home. Throughout her story, she challenges the reader’s perception of Iranian culture, by highlighting the strength, courage, and creativity that epitomized her students in a newly founded era of political and social repression. Though she feels burdened in her home, she remarks upon the power of time and social progress; she ends her life story

¹⁰ Quote derived from Azar Nafisi’s website: <http://azarnafisi.com/about-azar/> and the initial pages of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003)

with the powerful words: “how wonderful it is to be a woman and a writer at the end of the twentieth century” (340).

Just two years after President Bush’s declaration of the War Against Terrorism (2001-2008), Nafisi garnered massive attention from the American public, which left literary critics speculating as to why it received such American praise, in a period politically marked by isolationism. Nafisi’s memoir resided for over 117 weeks on the *New York Times*’ bestseller list and won a series of literary awards including: the 2004 “Non-fiction Book of the Year Award” from *Booksense*, the “Frederic W. Ness Book Award”, the 2004 “Latifeh Yarsheter Book Award”, an award from the American Immigration Law Foundation, the 2006 “Persian Golden Lioness Award” for literature, and was a finalist for the 2004 “PEN/Martha Albrand Award” for Memoir (*Azar Nafisi*). Nafisi even was pictured in a 2004 Audi ad alongside David Bowie, and other celebrities, in their “Never Follow” campaign. She also received praises from world-renowned literary artists such as Margaret Atwood and Susan Sontag for her work. Apart from its obvious appeal to Western readers for its inclusion of classic Western novels such as *Lolita* (1955), critics and fanatics are left wondering how her work received such an explosive reaction.

Among many literary scholars, *Reading Lolita* is treated with an almost opposite reaction to the American public. Critics frequently discuss Nafisi’s blatant aversion to the Islamic regime, and her enjoyment of Western novels, and view her story as a perpetuation of negative Middle Eastern stereotypes. Though their arguments have solid support from the text, critics seem to undermine the social events of the early 2000s that characterize American readership. Furthermore, their contention with *Reading Lolita*

does not explain an argument for the overwhelming amount of Iranian literary releases and the competing popularization of other Iranian female texts within a short time. A highly contentious topic, the following section describes the popular discussion among critics of Nafisi's appeal to the American audience. After discussing and commenting upon these debates, I assert that there are underlying social explanations for the popular demand of Iranian female memoirs in the United States that provide a more time accurate portrayal of the American readership.

I. Disciples of Said

Stemming from Edward Said's account of the mystification and "othering" of the Middle East, in his *Orientalism* (1978), perhaps the largest debate surrounding *Reading Lolita*, is its' proposed rehashing of Orientalist stereotypes. According to Said, Orientalism originates from the European Enlightenment and colonization where the West, "the Occident" constructed the East, "the Orient" as inferior and in need of Western intervention. Furthermore, the West depicted, and continues to depict, the Arab world as exotic, aggressive, and part of a mystified fantasy (1978). Scholars alluding to Said's *Orientalism* in their critique of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* assert that Nafisi's writing generates a massive American audience due to its alleged support of cultural imperialism. Most pointedly, Hamid Dabashi's review of her memoir and the concept of "native informers", published in Egypt's *al-Ahram Weekly* (2006), describes Nafisi's work as "warmongering" in the age of The War on Terrorism. Though his notions of Nafisi's militant intentions are slightly radical among critics who stem from his work, Dabashi's underlying argument views *Reading Lolita's* depiction of Islam as a violent

and abusive religion from which Muslim women require saving (Dabashi 2006). Seeing as many current conversations among the media and the American public about Islamic nations, such as Iran, focus on the states' hostility and violence, Nafisi's depiction of a secret group of women escaping the laws of Islam would cater to the American audience's "othered" perception of the Middle East.

Additionally, Dabashi asserts that Nafisi draws the American reader in with implications that she supports Western influence in the Middle East.¹¹ According to him, Nafisi expresses a "visceral hatred of everything Iranian" (par. 11) and acts as a colonial agent in biasing her readers and supporting imperialist involvement. Intriguingly, Dabashi fails to note the sections of Nafisi's memoir where she openly discusses her fears of painting the West in a positive light. She has her students read *The Bellarosa Connection* (Saul Bellow 1989) in hopes that they stop looking at the West "too uncritically" (312), and earlier in the memoir, she worries that she leads Yassi astray, by promoting a life in America that is "essentially not good for her" (270). Though her oppressive images of the Islamic Republic portray a hatred for the regime, her narrative does not specify that she believes the West is a better place.

Additionally, Dabashi implies that Nafisi encourages the agenda of neo-conservative officials in the United States by ignoring the multi-cultural discussions taking place in liberal arts schools and emphasizing the need for Western literature in Iranian schools. The scholar also applies a feminist approach to his critique when he states, "Domestically within the United States, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* promotes the cause of 'Western Classics' at a time when decades of struggle by postcolonial, black and

¹¹ This section relies heavily on research from Hamid Dabashi's "Native informers and the making of an American Empire" published in *al-Ahram Weekly* (2006)

Third World feminists, scholars and activists have finally succeeded to introduce a modicum of attention to world literatures”, alluding to intersectional feminism (par.12). However, he fails to note how Nafisi’s text serves as a form of “world literature” in itself due to it being an account of an Iranian woman’s experience in a third world country.

One could also read Nafisi’s celebration of Western literature as an example of promoting familiarity within the human experience. The works she chooses, *Daisy Miller* (1878), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), etc., are all societal critiques, implying that both Eastern and Western societies serve as oppressors. While celebrating characters of Middle Eastern such as Scheherazade in *A Thousand And One Nights* with her book club, Nafisi consistently comments on the familiarity and joy of reading Iranian tales and discusses how she cannot enjoy current Persian pop music and culture for their political ties (Nafisi 5, 10, 60). Thus, she stresses the impact of social and systematic change on her personal ability to continue relishing and dwelling on Iranian texts. Her celebration of Western novels does not negate the importance of Iranian literature in her intellectual foundations, but it signifies her ability to relate her experience with that of Western authors. Since Arab cultures are being “othered” by the established colonial ideology, an example of a relation between Western and Eastern experiences does not only invite American audiences to bridge cultural distinctions between the regions but would imply that they are capable of doing so. While Dabashi is accurate in describing Nafisi’s active disapproval of the Islamic Republic, the implication that Nafisi’s memoir is intended to encourage support for American military action is unsubstantiated; however, his work provides a guide for expansion among those who agree with his Orientalist critique.

Amid those who expand on Dabashi's argument, John Carlos Rowe provides a subsequent explanation for Nafisi's success. In his work, "Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in Idaho" (2007), Rowe validates Dabashi's notions while applying the lens of cultural imperialism to other theories of why and how American readers have responded to the memoir. For example, some scholars have suggested that *Reading Lolita* has invited an American audience because of the audience's interest in how literary texts are interpreted based on where they are read (Rowe 2007). Rowe includes Susan Stanford Friedman's thoughts in her work, "Unthinking Manifest Destiny: Muslim Modernities on Three Continents" (2007). She poses that Nafisi assesses the Western novels as "decadent" compared with the English and American critical consideration of these works as part of the past; yet, this would imply that Nafisi's group acts as a representation of all Iranian women and further emphasizes the idea of the "primitive east." In actuality, Nafisi bashes symbols of "Western decadence," while noting how certain characteristics labeled one as Western (not wearing a beard or ties) and were all part of a "plot" to negate Iranian culture by imperialists (Nafisi 578).

Rowe also considers the theory that Nafisi's work is a manifestation of feminism, and thus invites feminist readers. However, in Nafisi's pointing towards modernism and frequently describing the act of unveiling, Rowe asserts that Nafisi's success is primarily due to its affirmation of Western feminism, which widely ignores the historical and cultural situations of women in different parts of the world (2007). One could note, however, that Rowe does not discuss the current characteristics of feminism that promoted diversity in multiple dimensions. Several other scholars, including Mitra Rastegar, echo Rowe's assertions, as Rastegar argues that Nafisi's writing transforms the

women in her book club into Western subjects by proclaiming that their individuality is only shown through the removal of Islamic garment. Thus, Rowe concludes that Nafisi's work legitimizes Western cultural texts as forerunners that encourage political revolution and regime change in Iran (2007), in this way, many critics agree with Dabashi's claim that Nafisi's work is a prelude to or an act of cultural imperialism.

Several other scholars, including Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, have published similar articles laying out current arguments for the American perception of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and appealing to Orientalist tropes. In their work, "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2008), Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh discuss the reading of Iranian memoirs as appealing because of the lack of information around Middle Eastern feminism. They suggest that the absence of lower class women or women's rights movements in Nafisi's memoir illustrates that the feminism portrayed omits a portion of Iranian women's issues (2008). Given that feminism in the early 2000s began shifting towards the notion of inclusivity and diversity, their argument complements Dabashi's assertions that Nafisi's memoir appeals to Western feminists who focus their attention on upper class women. The two authors also discuss the book's American appeal in terms of literary value. Through Nafisi's allusions to rhetorical and thematic materials, her use of widely known literary works add literary value and Western legibility to her memoir, they contend, nevertheless, that Nafisi caters to an English-speaking audience, for whom the scarcity of Iranian literature suggests that she disregards her own culture's texts (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 2008). Nafisi does explain the lack of Iranian texts throughout *Reading Lolita*, and notes that she considers Iranian literature to be a place of comfort and familiarity (2003). Perhaps, if

one were to apply a more accurate description of her relationship with Iranian literature, her piece suggests that she considers Western literature as a modicum from which Iranians can discuss contentious societal norms in a space of fiction and art.

Collen Clemenz also discusses the text's literary appeal for Western readers along with its feminist portrayal of Iranian women in her work, "A Resistant Reading of *Reading Lolita in Tehran...*" (2013). Clemenz asserts that Nafisi's work should be regarded as one woman's experience rather than a representation of all Iranian women's thoughts. Seeing as Nafisi's story expands on her feelings of loneliness and desire for growth, Nafisi does imply that her memoir should be taken as her experience as one particular woman living in Iran. Nafisi states that her "main link with the outside world had been the university, and now that [she] had severed that link, there on the brink of the void, [she] could invent the violin or be devoured by the void" (Nafisi 24). The intimate quality of her words in this passage, and many others throughout the novel, suggest that she wants her audiences to take her piece as part of her own vulnerability. Her statement explains that she does not know how those outside of university were feeling, and now that she had left, her sphere of influence is only herself and the few women she picked for her class. Furthermore, she even states that the "personal and political are independent but not one and the same thing" (Nafisi 273), implying that her memoir may refer to the politics of Iran, but it mostly reflects on her personal experience.

The previous scholars mentioned, along with many more (Hossein Nazari, Nima Naghibi, Gideon Lew Kraus, etc.) argue that Nafisi's memoir conforms to the logic of Western imperialist thought and invites American audiences to read her work as it poses familiar distinctions. However, the criticisms provided by Dabashi, Rowe, and others do

not explain the surge in popularity among other Iranian books released in the same period. While Nafisi does highlight the notion of oppressive Islamic states through her creation of a secret all-female class to subvert the current boundaries placed on women and education in Iran, the American public has had a strong positive reaction in reading other Iranian memoirs that stress substantially different aspects of Iranian culture and statehood. Within the next few years of *Reading Lolita's* publication, stories such as Satrapi's *Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood* (2003), Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003), Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), and Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening* (2006) populated American bestsellers lists and ruled the Western book club scene.

Assuming that not all of these pieces of literature have the same underlying Orientalist depictions, how is it, then, that the American public has had a similar reaction to other Iranian works? Also, if Orientalism dates back to the foundations of European colonialism, couldn't it be said that *Reading Lolita* would have the same success in the United States if it were released decades prior? In the following section, I examine Nafisi's work and provide my explanation for its American success, presenting it closely to the sociopolitical contexts of America that I described in the previous chapter.

II. Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* After 9/11

In looking at the timeliness of *Reading in Lolita in Tehran's* American publication, one must consider the effects of the catastrophic 9/11 attacks on the American reader. As you may recall from the previous chapter, the September 11 attacks pulled American society out of complacency, which influenced Americans to seek

foreign literature as a response to political isolationism. While the administration promoted nationalism, with an outward response, the American literary marketplace internally opened space for cross-cultural discussion. Furthermore, the attacks affected individual connections between personal and public experiences, illustrating a desire to differentiate between the realms of memory and history. *Reading Lolita* appeals to these new-founded American characteristics as Nafisi's work discusses boundaries between the public and private on a cross-cultural and psychological level.

Nafisi's work appeals to the idea of literary expansion, as it serves as an Iranian novel structured around widely discussed works of the Western canon. This part is obvious; however, Nafisi physically presents herself as a mixture of different cultures. Within the first few pages of the memoir, Nafisi discusses how her living room decorations showcase her "nomadic and borrowed life" (7). She introduces her readers to a background of mixed education and lifestyles, placing herself as an example of cross-cultural influences. Though subtly explained, Nafisi also describes aspects of Iranian culture that may be uncommon among American spaces but naturally part of her daily routine. For example, she discusses the "aesthetic ritual" of tea, highlighting its importance in Iranian culture and providing distinct images of the tea glasses traditionally used (19). Nafisi does this several times throughout the novel, highlighting the flowers the girls bring at the start of the class (giving gifts when entering someone's home is a longstanding aspect of Persian etiquette) and the pastries Sanaz brings to announce her engagement (*Shirin Dadan*) (8, 260). As she emphasizes the negative societal effects of the Islamic regime, she provides American readers with part of Iranian culture that would otherwise be overlooked in international rhetoric. She then goes on to describe her living

room and housing by placing common objects such as furniture and paintings in conjunction with the Elburz Mountains and the cul-de-sac next to her home (Nafisi 7-8). In doing so, Nafisi paints a vibrant picture of cultural variety and places herself as someone with knowledge of foreign places. While she may be asserting herself as a “native informer” (Dabashi), Nafisi’s work also discusses facets of Iranian culture unrelated to Islamic fundamentalism. American audiences are provided with beautiful imagery of Iranian culture, which appease their search for cross-cultural communication. As a reader, characterizing Nafisi stands as a mode of relation, and thus, readers can feel a deeper sense of cultural enlightenment through the author’s perspective.

The title, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is in itself an example of a mixture of culture and literature as well. Though *Lolita* is renowned as a revered piece of Western fiction, those with knowledge of the novel are most likely aware of Nabokov’s background. As Nabokov was a Russian émigré who was displaced from his country after the Russian revolution, Nafisi’s focus on this particular novel mixes the reader’s perception of culture even further. Aside from the juxtaposition of Islamic and Iranian principles that the women in her class are rebelling, Nafisi’s decision to read *Lolita* and her expanding knowledge on Nabokov places the reader as a witness to both Iranian culture and the product of different migrations. Since the Bush administration’s decision to go to war against the “Axis of Evil” displays an American mindset of international disunion, Nafisi’s dedication to Nabokov and the women’s ability to read and expand their knowledge of a Russian writer’s novel provides readers with an example of a cultural accord. Furthermore, the way her class consists of Iranian women reading Western

cultures displays a union between specifically Islamic and Western cultures, emphasizing the distinction between political and social discourse.

Recalling the psychological effects of identity and trauma that the attacks caused for Americans, Nafisi's work tackles public and private spheres in several distinctions. In looking at Nafisi as what Dabashi calls a "native informer" her direct interaction with the Iranian state gives American readers the position of a "direct witness"; yet, Nafisi plays with the idea of privacy and publicity by making her class secretive and emphasizing throughout the memoir how the women reacted between public and private spheres (Nafisi 2003). Furthermore, American readers dealing with the dichotomy of public and private witnessing are drawn to Nafisi's work because her memoir makes public what was originally a private situation, bridging the gap between public and private domains and making a connection between trauma and the public gaze.

The second aspect of trauma and identity that cater to the post 9/11 in *Reading Lolita* are its imposing themes of memory and transformation. In the first chapter, I discussed how the key identity issues that American readers dealt with in their response to 9/11 reflected upon how it affected their notions of times, witness, loss and privacy. Nafisi also portrays a conflict with her identity in how she emphasizes the conflict between her memories and reality. When visiting her friend's apartment, the narrator is "struck" by a realization: "memories have ways of becoming independent of the realities they invoke" (317). In including this key phrase, Nafisi reflects upon how memories can destroy one's relationship to a place or person. Her emphasis on independence separates her memories from the private realm and introduces them to the public form of reality. Having left her home, Nafisi often refers back to her memories, relating the experience

with the impact of change and time. As the American bubble of security was broken and the public/private witness impacted by the media, the memory of those attacks affects the American identity. Nafisi's discussion of this part of her diasporic life builds a connection with American readers on a psychological level.

While Nafisi's work appeals to post 9/11 American audiences because of the key emotional and cultural response of Americans directly after the attack, her work also touches on other societal dimensions. The attacks were a critical event for Americans and distinctly altered many people's worldview; however, the timeliness of Azar Nafisi's memoir also deals with societal progressions that correlate with an advancement in technology and the Internet.

III. The New Media Age: Reading *Lolita* in Cyberspace

The introduction of social media provided new forms of communication and interaction with social spheres. The previous chapter, "America's Expanding Society", discusses how social media influenced a change in the access of information, promotion of entertainment, and the socialization of isolated groups. Nafisi's work touches on these aspects in several different lights; her text touches on physical and social isolation, her inclusion of a book club references a popular trend in America at the time, and the literary discussions within her book club reference the juxtaposition of private and public spheres within an Iranian female's experience.

As social media encourages a glimpse into other communities and lifestyles, Nafisi's publication during the "First Media Surge" (Merrell) implies that her American readership contains a mindset of those looking to understand other cultures. Similar to the

response to post 9/11 isolationism, social media advancement promotes outward cultural expansion. Nafisi describes several levels of social interactions in her novel that are used to appeal to such an audience. For example, as aforementioned, Nafisi refers to her book club as her only connection to the outside world (2003). Those living in the continuing social media onset often utilize the Internet and social media as their only form of communication with the world around them. Nafisi's utilization of the book club for her social interaction mimics a form of limited human contact that social media often creates. The next level in her use of social interactions is that which she has with her audience. Since *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is in the form of a memoir, the work presents her thoughts directly to the audience. Instead of requiring her readers to analyze fictional characters, she directly interacts with her readership and offers the public a chance to skip a step in communicating with them. Thus, mimicking another aspect of social media that would appeal to those looking to make easy communication. Her message to her readership relays a form of social significance in that it is a communication between cultures.

Though the presence of social media and Internet social sites were relatively new in the time of Nafisi's release, *Reading Lolita* was prominent among online discussions and forums.¹² A quick search on Google results in thousands of recent and earlier discussions of Nafisi's work and many debates on how readers should approach the memoir. Among the most common results, many individual and collective blogs in the early 2000s posted reading guides for teachers and book clubs to use as material for literary examination. For example, two popular online reading groups

¹² The information in this section is from my research and scanning of Internet sources on Google.

“ReadingGroupGuides” and “LitLovers” both provide summaries, author biographies, and discussion questions for teachers or book club leaders to use in their group discussion. Nafisi’s publisher, Penguin Random House, also provided an in depth presentation of Nafisi’s work and through which contexts it could be taught in classrooms. Furthermore, personal and community online forums such as the *Middle East Quarterly*’s online forum, the Lonely Planet’s online book club discussions, *The Atlantic*’s online forum, and many individual blog pages. Her popularity in online discussion forums, at a relatively new period for the Internet, implies that her work reached American society on a diverse scale.

The rise in online book clubs is often given as an explanation for Nafisi’s work, as *Reading Lolita* is characterized as a book club favorite across American web pages. As I stated earlier, her text is mentioned in Oprah’s online book club described as a book that “opened [American] minds, showing us [the Iranian] world” (Raffel 2016). However, the connection between Nafisi’s book club and its impacts on the American audiences reaches further than its placement as an American book club favorite. Just as social media invited an online discussion of literary text, Nafisi’s discussion of Western texts within her book club promotes a social interaction for a group of people otherwise isolated. In describing her choice of women for the club, Nafisi asserts:

One reason for my choice of these particular girls was the peculiar mixture of fragility and courage I sensed in them. They were what you would call loners, who did not belong to any particular group or sect. I admired their ability to survive not despite but in some ways because of their solitary lives. We can call

the class “a space of our own,” Manna had suggested, a sort of communal version of Virginia Woolf’s room of her own. (12).

The portrayal of these characters as “solitary” implies a form of social isolation in which the girls seek communal interaction in their book club space. As American readers were introduced to new social spaces, Nafisi’s book club reflects the feeling of belonging generated from these group discussions. Furthermore, this space provides readers with a glimpse inside the women’s private identities.

The key connection between public and private spheres in the social media world is its creation of a digital identity. It is within these identities, that the storyteller becomes part of their own story and caters the tale to their environment (Koosel 61). Nafisi highlights many times throughout her memoir the clash between the public persona of the girls and their colorful identities. Perhaps, the most discussed image among literary critics is Nafisi’s description of the two class photos. As she held them in front of her she describes,

“In the first there are seven women...according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves...In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall...Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and the length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same. (4)

Though argued by many of its form of “unveiling” familiar to the Western rhetoric of the oppressive hand of Islam, Nafisi’s description of the two photographs reveals the distinct separation between the girls’ personal and public identities. American readers may be drawn to such an image because of its mysticism; nevertheless, this portrayal describes a

public persona controlled by the laws of one's government. Though less aggressive and complicated, American society controls the narrative of digital identities in that people often portray specific aspects of themselves, to fit in or influence others. As Nafisi's identity transfers within the realm of fundamentalism and literary discussion and between Iranian and Western ideals, her work forms her own digital identity.

IV. The Feminist Argument

I have touched briefly on aspects of Nafisi's feminist approach that are criticized by scholars in the literary community; however, the explanations provided fail to specify the contextual background for Nafisi's readership in *Reading Lolita's* time. Rowe, Donadey, and Ahmed-Ghosh quickly examine the feminist aspects of Nafisi's work, and both discuss how her lack of lower class characters appeals to a traditionally Western approach of feminism. And while Nafisi does only include Iranian women with the capabilities of attending university and taking extra classes, her appeal to post 2000s Western feminists lies within more than one context.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the last decade of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first century consisted of a time where feminist scholars promoted an embrace of diverse argument and femininity. In doing so, Western feminists re-framed their activism in an intersectional context. The popularity of this movement in solidarity with the rise in foreign literature implies that Americans living in the era of third wave feminism were interested in learning the stories of women with different religions, class, ethnicities, and other backgrounds. Though Nafisi does cater to a previous form of feminism in her lack of diverse Iranian characters, her work does appeal to third wave feminists in its depiction of women's lives in a third world country ruled by

Islamic fundamentalism. Nafisi also emphasizes the celebrations in her variety of religious backgrounds several times throughout the novel. She states,

“In selecting my students, I did not take into consideration their ideological or religious backgrounds. Later, I would count it as the class’s greatest achievement that such a mixed group, with different and at times conflicting background, personal as well as religious and social, remained so loyal to its goals and ideals” (11).

In doing so, she emphasizes her own solidarity with third-wave feminism and implies that her class inadvertently stands as a mixture of perspectives for feminists to analyze.

Several times throughout the memoir, she illustrates the conflict and debate that arises from these ideological differences in the group (2003)—enforcing an open discussion of beliefs among women about contentious topics.

Though her work could be viewed as an embrace of imperialist feminist desires, such as those described by Naghibi in the previous chapter, Nafisi’s inclusion and discussion of femininity among women with different ideologies portrays a broader, complex feminist discourse. Nafisi, herself, outwardly states her disapproval of Islamic feminism, referring to it as a “contradictory notion” and a “myth”; she also states that it “enabled rulers to have their cake and eat it too: they could claim to be Islamic and Progressive, while modern women were denounced as Westernized, decadent and disloyal” (Nafisi 262). Her denunciation of Islamic feminism echoes part of a larger discourse surrounding the tenants of Islamic feminism and submission to patriarchal systems. Throughout the story of her life, however, she provides distinct depictions of Islamic feminism in some of the women around her. Two of the members of her book

club, Mahshid and Manna, regularly assert their conservative opinions in their book club, while still participating in the women's discussion of gender issues in Iran and societal critiques in the novels. For example, during their discussion of censorship and the divisive nature of *Lolita* she asserts that it should be acceptable to consider some things morally wrong and to have a responsibility to do the right thing (Nafisi 51). Nafisi inclusion of these discussions, in the words of the women and their responses, shows the reader an alternative relationship between femininity and religious ideals. She also highlights her interaction with Razieh, a courageous and self-defining member of the Mujahedeen, who was executed by the Republic and previously delivered a speech to Nafisi about the closed-minded education of women in Iran (219-221). Though not an explicit statement of support for Islamic feminism, Nafisi generates a conversation among readers that echoes the current debates surrounding the topic. Furthermore, her depiction of a book club directly appeals to women across borders because of the historical nature of book clubs.

In a 2007 NPR story, Eric Weiner discussed how book clubs consist mainly of women. A study by the Associated Press in the early 2000s found that not only are book groups mostly women, but also new literary blogs are also widely "manned" by women (Weiner 2007). Considering *Reading Lolita's* massive book club readership, a mostly female audience enjoys Nafisi's work. In doing so, her work portrays an all female book club for a mostly female book club. Since Nafisi focuses each part of the memoir on a specific Western novel, her class discussion of the novel empowers women in their ability to decipher traditionally male texts. As Anahit Behrooz states, "Nafisi demonstrates how these texts do not only belong to white, male readers, but can be read,

understood, and interpreted by anyone, in this case, Middle Eastern women” (“Orientalist Fantasies: Reclaiming The Middle East in Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*” 2017). Thus, Nafisi’s work caters to not only intersectional feminists, but also depicts female empowerment for a majority female audience.

Nafisi’s portrayal of gender discrimination in the Islamic Republic is a disputed topic among her critics and fanatics. As American audiences were introduced to the concept of intersectional feminism, Nafisi’s work stands out as an example of a female narrative that depicts discussion of gendered experience within a religious system. Feminist discourse is historically a complex issue, since feminist movements are consistently changing and shaping their narratives among social and political events in society. With this complication arises the debate among scholars surrounding the concept of Islamic feminism. Americans exposed to the idea of the third wave movement are drawn to works of Iranian women because of its inherent discussion of gender discrimination in a theocratic regime. However, Nafisi’s underlying depiction of Islamic female agency, and her outward disapproval of Islamic feminism, presses for a wider discussion of the discourse surrounding female empowerment within religious and patriarchal systems. In doing so, Nafisi appeals to both sides of the argument and provides uninformed readers with a complex example of Iranian sisterhood.

V. Conclusion

It is important to clarify the purposes of my close reading of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and its relation to the sociopolitical context of the time it was released in America. In laying out the current critical debates, I place my argument as a supplement, instead of a criticism of the current discussion. However, I do point out specific aspects

of their arguments in which Nafisi's narrative does not always support. In doing so, I debate that these discussions do not accurately portray the reason for Nafisi's success in the United States and comparative success of other Iranian memoirs in the same time period. I confer the validity of these previous critics' work in discussing the imperialist notions of Nafisi's text, but I argue that her text directly appeals to the post 9/11 American reader in the context of terrorism, cyberspace, and advances of feminism that emerged into American society in the early 2000s. With close attention to how Nafisi portrays public and private aspects of identity, I complicate the current the critical debates by adding these sociopolitical events that marked the time period in which her work was released. In doing so, I emphasize the importance of recognizing modern intricacies of an ever changing global society. In the next chapter, I will examine perhaps the other most famous Iranian memoir and apply the same arguments in their interaction with the text.

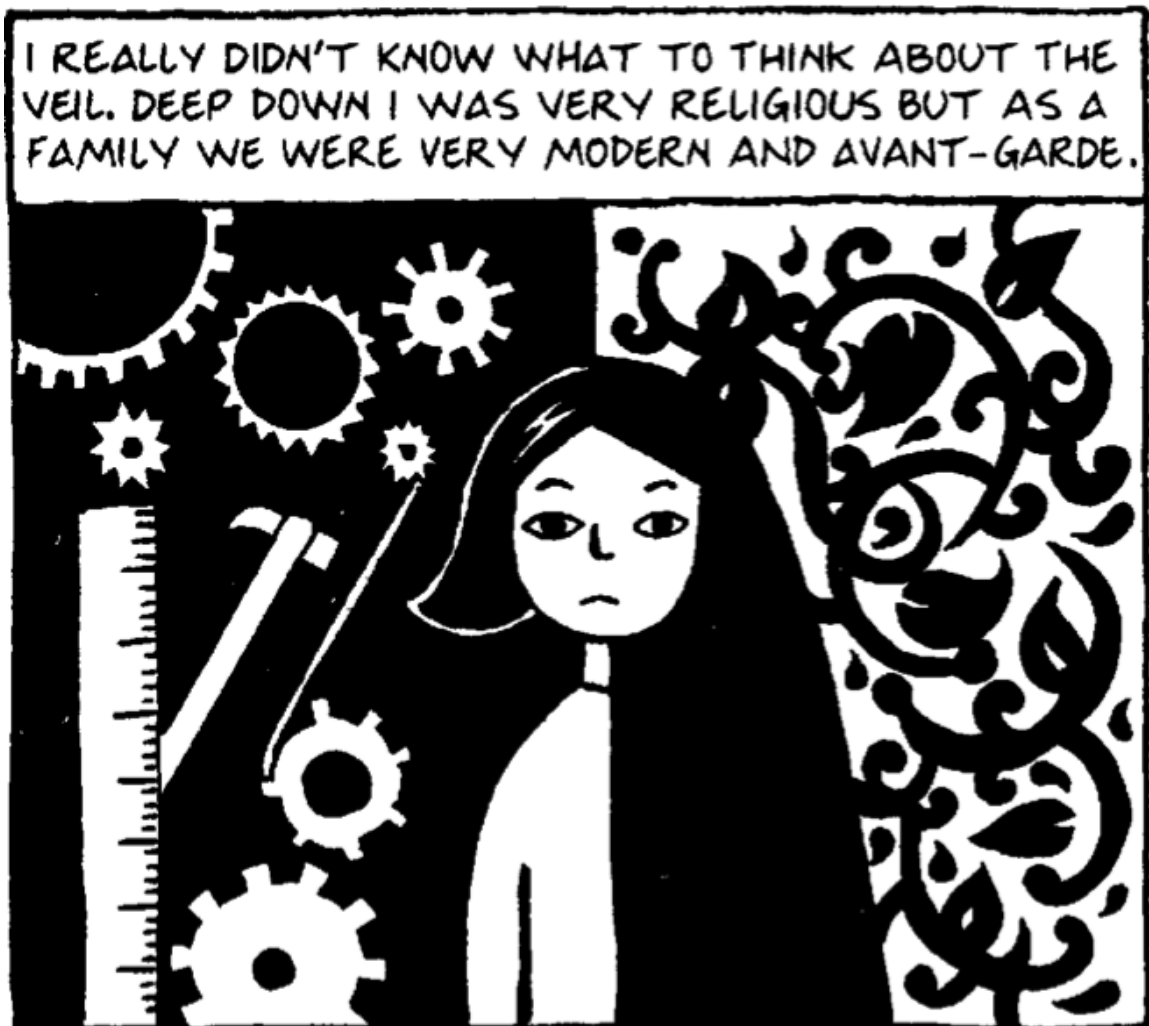


Photo Credit: *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Random House, 2007) 6

Figure 1: Reflecting Identities

Chapter 3: *The Complete Persepolis: Picturing Identity*

“One can forgive but one should never forget.”—Such are the last words of Marjane Satrapi’s introduction to her groundbreaking graphic memoir, *Persepolis: A Story of A Childhood* (2003). Originally published in French, in four volumes, between the years of 2000 and 2003, Satrapi released the first English volume, *Persepolis 1*, in 2003 and the second, *Persepolis 2*, in 2004.¹³ While her first edition depicts her life as a child in Iran, just before the conclusion of the Iranian revolution and the years following, *Persepolis: A Story of A Return* illustrates her time studying in Vienna, Austria and her subsequent return to Iran in its established Islamic Republic. Together, the two volumes undertake a Bildungsroman focused on relations between the personal and the political, space and identity, traditionalism and the avant-garde, and more.

Satrapi’s story opens with a 10-year old Marji, observing the veil a year after the Iranian revolution in 1980 (Satrapi 3). Though Marji discusses confusion among her peers of the mandatory veil, she immediately expresses her devotion to religion from birth. As Marji grows into Marjane, Satrapi’s memoir pictures several revelations of self-image and identity that are personally rooted in her political landscape. After frequently expressing dissent in her classroom, Marji is sent to study high school in Vienna, Austria (153). It is in this second half of the story that Satrapi truly depicts the emotional and

¹³ For clarity, I will be referring to *The Complete Persepolis*, a collection of both volumes, released in 2007.

physical effects of leaving one's home, at a time of conflict and negativity. In a time of insecurity, Satrapi feels conflicted in her Iranian identity, even denouncing it at one point, and after experiencing loss and physical trauma in a foreign space, she returns home with a hybrid persona. Battling the politics of gender, class, and nationality, Satrapi's memoir provides American readers with an insight into Iranian culture and a devotion to one's home country. Though she ultimately leaves Iran, the final image is of a happy departure and a promise of self-assurance in her new society (Satrapi 341).

In 2007, Satrapi wrote and co-directed the film version of her work, alongside acclaimed French filmmaker, Vincent Paronnaud. Upon its release, and its box-office success, *Persepolis* garnered fifty-five international award nominations, including the Academy Award for "Best Animated Feature Film of the Year," and won twenty-eight awards.¹⁴ I remember watching this film, at ten years old, with my family and seeing them laugh and reminisce; though I wasn't directly affected by the historical events of twentieth century Iran, her story impacted me in the emotions it evoked from my loved ones. While successful as a film, the memoir also reached international audiences in its written form. Including many notable French comic book awards, the graphic biography was appointed one of the "100 Books of the Decade" by *The Times* (London) and was chosen by the Young Adult Library Association as a recommended title for all students (Steven Barclay Agency).

Since its release, *Persepolis* is widely used in American schools to teach students the history of Middle Eastern/American interactions, and to discuss Satrapi's larger themes of self-discovery within contrasting societies. In 2013, however, *Persepolis* was

¹⁴ For a complete list of *Persepolis*' awards, visit its IMDB page, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0808417/awards>

banned by Chicago public school district for its graphic depictions of violence, which triggered an outcry and protest by students and teachers arguing its necessity in the classroom (“Who’s Afraid of Persepolis?” 2013). Satrapi commented directly on the ban, emphasizing her intentions of releasing the work: “It’s based on the story of my life, so it’s not some stuff that is made up to make kids scared. These things exist in the world. It takes place everywhere...these are human realities, and if you are aware of them, then maybe later on, we can fight them. (“Who’s Afraid of Persepolis?” 2013). The debate surrounding the use of Satrapi’s work in American public education led to *Persepolis*’ placement on the Top Ten Most Challenged Books of 2014, alongside Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (ALA Office For Intellectual Freedom 2014). Aside from this ban, and its public dissent, *Persepolis*’ achieved international recognition for its depiction of Iran and portrayal of life under an authoritarian regime.

Alongside *Persepolis*’ multi-textual successes, the work gathered a generally positive formal, and informal, critical reaction. Among these works, there are multiple explanations for its success among the American audience. Though less contentious than the reception of *Reading Lolita*, Satrapi’s work follows the debate of the previous memoir and a larger collective of Iranian memoirs in how they portray Iranian society and an Islamic regime. Just as in Nafisi’s work, there are multiple perspectives on the success of Satrapi’s graphic, and some even use her work as an antidote to Nafisi’s orientalist depiction; however, it remains unclear how both succeeded in winning the American audience in the same period, despite their proposed differences. To provide a

supplementing argument, I examine *Persepolis*, as it relates to the effects of the multi-dimensional sociopolitical events in America at the time.

I. Current Debates around *Persepolis*

Similar to Nafisi's work, though a significantly less prominent discussion, *Persepolis* generated critical examinations on its expression of Orientalist fantasies. You may recall from the previous chapter that the term Orientalism derives from Said's exposure of the "othering" of Eastern countries by the West (*Orientalism* 1978). Lila Barzegar, in her work, "Persepolis & Orientalism: A Critique of The Reception History of Satrapi's Memoir" (2012), argues that though *Persepolis* has received little negative criticisms, it too falls under Dabashi's claims of a native informer and is actually more dangerous than other Iranian memoirs in promoting an Orientalist mindset (4) Barzegar emphasizes how Satrapi's memoir was intended for Western audiences since its publication (13). First released in French, then published in English, Satrapi's Western appeal lies directly in the language it is shared. It is within this context, that Satrapi serves as the "native informer" Dabashi discusses in his work "Native Informer and the Making of An American Empire" (2006). Since Satrapi released her work in a Western language, discussing her story as an Iranian, she provides a direct account to uninformed Western readers. Furthermore, Barzegar argues that Satrapi's form of a graphic memoir and its film alias also pushes it to a broader audience, "dangerously" increasing potential for "Western benevolence" (15). In this sense, Satrapi's account of her life as young Iranian and the oppressive qualities of Islam strengthens her connection with non-Iranian readers, as they identify with the physical image of a child. I would argue, however, that

Satrapi's literary form emphasizes individuality in its drawing, because readers physically visualize an image of Satrapi. In that context, Satrapi's story is emphasized as her account, rather than a collective opinion of all Iranians.

Kristyn Acho echoes the orientalist argument in her "Unveiling the Middle Eastern Memoir: Reconfiguring Images of Iranian Women Through Post 9/11 Memoirs" (2012); however, she argues that *Persepolis* affirms orientalist assertions in its exoticism of the Iranian locale. In examining Satrapi's references to Western artists such as Iron Maiden and Michael Jackson (Satrapi 131), Acho argues that Satrapi "others" Iranian culture in more than one dimension; first, in that her American apparel is directly in contrast with her headscarf and because the context of her references emphasize her placement in an exotic sociopolitical atmosphere (24-25). Thus, the fact that Marji highlights the imagery of her denim jacket and headscarf stresses the striking difference between Iranian culture and Western society. To provide an alternative reading of this scene, I assert that Satrapi uses Western apparel to familiarize her interests with American readers. Michael Jackson, generally noted as a worldwide phenomenon, was popular among transnational audiences; Marji's inclusion of him implies universality in Western and Eastern interests. Often compared to Nafisi's memoir, partly due to their similarity in scope, *Persepolis* is argued to reach the American audience in contrary ways to its debated orientalist appeal.

For example, Nima Naghibi poses Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* as an "antithesis" to Nafisi's memoir in that it does not fit into an "easy categorization" (Naghibi 224). In her work, "Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's *Persepolis*" (2005), Naghibi endorses a "truer" example of an Iranian woman's example through Satrapi's

work. In comparing the two works, Naghibi asserts that Satrapi challenges many boundaries including “high brow and low brow” and “East and West” through its use of the graphic novel and uses those challenges to appeal to a Western audience (2005). In doing so, she implies that Western audiences enjoy reading books that challenge them to identify and analyze the identity of their characters, rather than stick to the pre-conceived notions they may have about a country. Naghibi continues to discuss how *Persepolis* uses familiar themes such as the image of the child and the feeling of alienation as a universal element in appealing to readers (2005). She suggests then that universal elements within the text can be employed in crossing cultural barriers. Therefore Naghibi suggests that Satrapi’s work serves as an example of writing that can be then used by other Iranian writers to appeal to an Anglo-Western audience.

Another intriguing argument against the Orientalist approach is Typhaine Leservot’s “Occidentalism”; in his work “Occidentalism: Rewriting the West in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persépolis*,” published in the *French Forum* (2011), Leservot asserts that Satrapi’s use of Western elements reconstructs Western materialism through Iranian context (2). In other words, Marji depicts her enjoyment of Michael Jackson and Iron Maiden through the lens of Iran’s regime change. Leservot explains:

“Prior to the Revolution, she was not fed western images encouraging cheap and shallow consumption; rather, she actively interacted with western culture on a very sophisticated level. She read western philosophy, learning both about Descartes and Marx, and drew parallels between Marx and her God (I., “La Bicyclette”).³ The visual juxtaposition of Descartes, Marx, and her God on one

double-page creates both a heterogeneous picture of the West where opposing philosophies do occur...” (2011)

Marji’s enjoyment of Western philosophy is pioneered by her curiosity; furthermore, her readings of Marx and Descartes relate heavily to the social commentary in her society. You may recall in the introduction how I mentioned the prominence of communist theory among elites and entire Iranian regions before the revolution. Marjane’s family was among those who often supported communist beliefs, as she discusses their frequent attendance of protests (Satrapi 2007). However, as internal changes within Iran erupt, Marji’s depicts Western elements in a more nuanced and exotic light. For example, in fear of travel restrictions in the new regime, Marji’s family takes a trip to Europe.



Photo Credit: *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Random House, 2007) 77

Figure 2: Satrapi's Trip to Europe

Leservot states, “Clichéd historical monuments symbolize Italy and a flamenco dancer evokes Spain ... Gone are western philosophers and the complexities of the West’s engagements with world politics” (2011). In this way, Marji visualizes Western landscapes through the eyes of the East. When considering the effects of this approach on American readers, one would argue that it effectively familiarizes audiences with popular Western elements through an Eastern lens. However, it is difficult to attribute Satrapi’s success to this approach, because it can be perceived as the opposite mentality to that which Western audiences are conditioned.

Critics also argue Satrapi's success for its blend of literary genres, the memoir and the graphic novel, and how it applies to her life in the diaspora. According to Amy Malek, author of "Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production: A case study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series" (*Iranian Studies* 2006), Satrapi experiments with literary genres to successfully portray exilic aspects such as self-reflection, identity-negotiation, and cultural translation. Malek identifies aspects of current (2006) in the United States, such as a trend in finding "ethnic diversity" through social and interactive means, creating a space where people broaden transcultural discussions (356). Diasporic communities fit in this discussion because of their diversity and their creation of hybrid cultures. Satrapi's striking depiction of her American cultural interests with the Iranian headscarf fits this sphere because she reiterates the presence of two cultures. Malek also describes the popularity of memoirs in the United States and their position as a personal and contextual account of other beliefs; additionally, she justifies Satrapi's memoir's appeal to American audiences because it depicts her Iranian identity among an audience that has curiosity towards Middle Eastern cultures (360-2). My argument ties closely to Malek's reading in that Marji's feelings of hybridity and her struggle for identity relate to the post 9/11 American sociopolitical context. Naghibi, Barzegar, Malek, and Acho's formal responses to *Persepolis*' appeal are just a few of many critical reactions to Satrapi's work, but the highlighted arguments accurately present the diverse approaches to understanding Satrapi's success.

In considering the popularity of Satrapi's *Persepolis* among Western audiences, the above discussions portray valid explanations. However, only Malek's approach specifies Satrapi's success in the United States—I will refer back to her argument later in

this chapter. Most of the other discussions among literary critics involve a collective mindset, paying little attention to Satrapi's appeal to the individual reader. In the following section, I will explain how the sociopolitical events that occurred in the United States, around the time of Satrapi's release, directly relate to the popularity of her text. Moreover, I will pay close attention to the dynamics between the individual and the public—examining the interaction between the text and singular readers.

II. Identity Conflicts Of Space and Memory

As Satrapi introduces readers to her account of life during and after the Iranian Revolution, she relays her experience across multiple spheres of identity, space, and time; and it is within these spheres that she appeals to a post 9/11 American reader. In the first chapter, I mentioned how Americans sought transnational experiences, in response to the nationalistic political rhetoric marking the time. Marji's story not only serves as a form of transnational literature, but she also presents her identity as a result of cross-cultural experiences. Though not frequently discussed, Marji attends a secular French school before the revolution; her interaction with French culture, at an early age, ultimately impacted her through a complicated relationship with religion and liberality (Satrapi 2003). Marji's family embraced the modern Western ideology, yet she embraced Iranian religion to the extent at which she wanted to become a prophet (6). After the revolution, her form of rebellion is within foreign garments, music, and entertainment; nevertheless, she still is unable to find her own identity and strives to do so when she leaves for Vienna, Austria (153). Satrapi marks her coming of age story by how she perceives herself within different spaces, providing American readers with a protagonist who also

seeks rationalization from foreign cultures. She endures physical and emotional changes throughout her story that echo her conflicting relationship with identity and nationality.

Marji moves back to Iran (246) after she realizes the Austrian space does not aid in helping her find her identity. After her return to Iran, she realizes she no longer recognizes the streets of her home country (250) and reflects upon how she can't immerse herself in Iranian culture anymore. In response, she enters a period of depression and attempts to commit suicide (pictured below).



Photo Credit: *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Random House, 2007) 272

Figure 3: Marji Committing Suicide

She writes, "I was a Westerner in Iran, and Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn't know anymore why I was living"—picturing herself as a loose, empty human shape (272). Satrapi emphasizes her discomfort in her own home country; her identity as an Iranian

changed in response to the political events, but in the West, she is an Iranian. Marji's discomfort with her person and space echoes American instability following the 9/11 attacks. America's border was no longer a safe space, and as I mentioned before, American readers were no longer complacent with the security of their safe identity. In this sense, Marji's story speaks directly to the American experience, materializing the reader's emotions and providing support in the form of representation.

Marji's conflict with her hybrid identities isn't the only thing speaking to the psychological effects of 9/11; her interaction with trauma and memory directly relates to the internal conflict between the public and private witness described in the first chapter. As a child, Marji experiences direct interaction with conflict, when she attends a demonstration with her parents. She explains, "I went with them (her parents), I passed out flyers...when suddenly things got nasty. For the first time in my life I saw violence with my own eyes" (76). Marji's interaction with violence directly portrays the private witness and how it interacts with the "spectacle" of violence. From there, she narrates violence from a first person perspective; Satrapi's emphasis of this point reflects upon the fact that she writes her story from memory. As she looks back, she realizes that her previous image of war and protest from someone else's narration. This interaction between personal experience and secondary narration presents itself several times in the text. When Marji returns to Iran, her dad tells her of all the political events that happened in Iran and Marji pictures the violence and destruction that ensued. She reflects upon the events and writes, "Next to my father's distressing report, my Viennese misadventures seemed like little anecdotes of no importance. So I decided that I would never tell them anything about my Austrian life. They had suffered enough as it was" (257). As she

relates her family's suffering to her own, she points out the conflict between her feelings and reality. Though her time in Austria had traumatic effects, she did not directly witness violence and destruction like her parents, which made her emotions seem invalid.

Americans, dealing with the images and aftermath of the attack, can seek refuge in her emotions. Satrapi's inclusion of these thoughts stresses the validity of the public witness, as she still felt the effects of sociopolitical instability even when she did not experience them on her own.

Satrapi's publication of *Persepolis* for a distinctly Western audience displays a connection between her work and the political events of its release. Released in several textual forms, after 9/11, *Persepolis* provides relatable experiences of identity confusion and coming of age in a time where Americans experienced social and individual insecurity, coupled with nationalistic rhetoric. Satrapi not only combats the evil image of Iran, by emphasizing her personal experience in contrast to the political, but she also appeases American desires in their search for transnational communication. Her work elevates identity issues and their connection with trauma, memory, and space, and encourages a discussion of what it means to be an individual in a warring community.

III. The Collective and the Individual

The second volume of *Persepolis*, released a year after the first in the United States, relays directly to the effects of cyberspace on society. In a broader sense, Marji's narrative serves as its own mode of communication, since it provides American audiences with a cultural experience different from their own. Similar to *Reading Lolita*, the discussions of Iranian society, religion, and politics come from a firsthand perspective. Just as society began interacting with other cultures in cyberspace, Marji's

text depicts direct communication between Eastern and Western cultures. She experiences life in Austria and speaks to the differences in culture and society from her own (Satrapi 2007). In doing so, she relays to her audience the experience of social communication and its effect upon her identity. Furthermore, the publication of her text, in its multiple literary genres, reaches a broader audience.

In its release, and the period after, Satrapi's graphic memoir made its appearance among multiple spaces for discussion on the Internet. Since the story is also illustrated in film, *Persepolis* reaches a broader audience than most Iranian narratives and is easily assessed among video-based social media sites like Youtube and multimedia blogs. A quick search on Youtube derives a plethora of clips from the movie, including her "Eye of The Tiger" music montage, which has 1.7 million views¹⁵. These clips provide spaces for commentary and discussion among a wide variety of Internet users, since the Youtube algorithm generally recommends videos that relate to search history and are popular among other Internet users. Audiences can then pull clips directly from the movie, film their own responses, and encourage the story to those who prefer film to other texts. The film and the memoir collaborate to provide a multilevel experience for young audiences and encourage literary analysis among different platforms. In addition, the story has a considerable presence among the blogosphere—making it easy for readers to find both formal and informal opinions. Notably, blogs for teachers and students such as "The Cult of Pedagogy," "More Humbly Did I Teach," and "LitMatters" provide readers with teaching guides, discussion questions, explanations of underlying themes, and spaces for commentary. As cyberspace immortalizes Satrapi's graphic novel, her story serves to

¹⁵ The famous scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIIAmCfHzbg> has generated a lively debate in the comments about the purpose of off-key singing for Marji's message.

educate younger generations and push for a different Iranian narrative in Western countries.

Since *Persepolis* is a memoir in the form of a graphic novel, it also reaches a younger audience. You may recall from the first section of this chapter that the book was named as a required text for all students; currently, teachers use the text to introduce students to current relationships between the West and the Middle East are using it. According to Lisa Botshon and Melinda Plastas in their article, “Homeland In/Security: A Discussion and Workshop on Teaching Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*” (*Feminist Teacher* 2009), Satrapi’s text can teach students about aspects of broader society in two spheres:

“First, it provides a creative venue for classroom discussions about nation, citizenship, gender, and war. Second, it offers a transversal space in which students can question Western notions about the Middle East. By offering students a more complex and less dualistic perspective on Iranian society and women, in particular, *Persepolis* encourages students to question the source of their (perceived) national insecurity and offers models of agency rooted in the homeland (Iran) [that] they have been encouraged to fear.” (2)

The text’s different forms of social communication mimic the effects of social media upon a society seeking information from other communities. As we observe social media root itself in Western society and influence how people perceive the world, Satrapi’s book serves the same purpose. Furthermore, its translation into film, and its tremendous success among Western film critics and audiences, speaks to the visual communication between seeing and feeling that social media creates.

In addition to its broader forms of communication, Satrapi's text conveys conflict between public and private personas. In the first chapter, I discussed how social networking promotes a digital identity, formed and manipulated by its environment, and how it influences the distinction between one's public and private identity. Marji's coming of age story speaks directly to the internal conflict of public and private identity in her presentation of life in both Iranian and Austrian society. For example, as Marji acclimates herself to Austrian society, she changes her appearance and her actions to fit in; she materializes her exploration of identity when she physically changes her haircut and pretends to smoke weed to fit in with her friends (191). Though Marji relays to the audience, her fears of becoming a drug addict (192), she continues to build her liberal persona to fit in with European society. In relating this to the effect of digital identities, one's public persona heavily interacts with their perception of society. People often present their personas to match what they believe society wants to see; however, this can have an adverse effect on one's identity because it becomes difficult to accept parts of one's self. Satrapi emphasizes this point when she depicts how she tried to hide her identity and is later proud of herself for accepting her nationality (pictured below).



Photo Credit: *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Random House, 2007) 195

Figure 4: Marji Says She's French

Marji states, “I should say that at the time, Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear. It was easier to lie than assume that burden” (195). The panel begins with Marji looking directly at the reader, which invites them to reflect upon the gravity of her situation. She turns to them again when she justifies her actions—implying that even she felt uncomfortable with hiding her identity.



Photo Credit: *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Random House, 2007) 197

Figure 5: Marji Declares Iranian Pride

“I AM IRANIAN AND PROUD OF IT!”...”For the first time in a year, I felt proud. I finally understood what my grandmother meant. If I wasn’t comfortable with myself, I would never be comfortable.” (197). Satrapi pictures herself in a prideful position. In contrast with the image above, Marji’s posture is dominating and confident. In an age where people manipulate their public identities to fit societal norms, Satrapi emphasizes the necessity of self-confidence and pride in one’s persona. As her story spreads among

audiences, her presence among cyberspace reflects upon the relatable aspects of her experience.

IV. Persepolis' Portrayal of Intersectionality

As with the other sociopolitical contexts described, Satrapi's work adds a literary dimension to the newly established third wave of feminism in more than one sphere. Though Satrapi's family is of a class where she can attend a private French school and travel around Europe, her story depicts the life of an Iranian woman living in a shifting period of ideology and religion (2007). Third wave feminists can utilize her text, as it portrays a gendered experience in a place where Western depictions of female agency are rare. Satrapi's success amongst feminist audiences lies within her discussions of female identity, sexuality, and coming of age. In response to Naghibi's point about imperialist feminist intentions of "unveiling" Middle Eastern women (*Rethinking Global Sisterhood...*2007), Satrapi's generally positive relationship with religion provides feminists with an alternative point of view. When she returns to Iran following the establishment of the new Islamic Republic, she deals firsthand with the oppressive qualities of fundamentalist ideology (Satrapi 2007); however, she highlights her contention with the governing bodies of Iran and not the religion. For example, when taking the ideological test for her college entrance exam, she answers the questions with a revelation of her relationship with God. When asked about wearing the veil she says, "No. I have always thought that if women's hair pose so many problems, God would certainly have made us bald." (284). Within this statement, and other instances of the text, Satrapi depicts an aspect of Islamic feminism. She is religious, even wanting to be a

prophet as a child (6); however, she does not agree with the strict fundamentalist laws of the new regime—making the distinction between Islam and oligarchy.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Satrapi enjoys the freedoms of a somewhat wealthy class in Iran; however, she still depicts a gendered experience among different sects of society. She portrays a religious feminism unfamiliar to that of the West, while still asserting her agency as a woman. For example, in her college years, Satrapi depicts several times where she outwardly contests the corruption and hypocrisy of the gendered restrictions. At an assembly about female modesty she states,

“Is religion defending our physical integrity or is it just opposed to fashion? You don’t hesitate to comment on us, but our brothers present here have all shapes and sizes of haircuts and clothes...why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on but they, as men, can get excited by two inches less of my head-scarf” (297)

Satrapi asserts her agency as a woman, while calling out the dual oppressive nature of fundamentalist laws. She portrays a gendered female experience in a male-oriented, corrupt world, while refraining from blaming it on the religion itself.

Satrapi also depicts intersectionality in her internal conflict with identity and mental health. After discovering the infidelity of her Austrian boyfriend, Satrapi folds in on herself and becomes homeless. She states, “I don’t have anyone. My entire existence had been planned around Markus, it’s surely for this reason that I found myself wandering like this” (239). In her depiction, her physical stability and security are marked by her identity as an Iranian woman. She touches on the hopelessness of her depression, while surviving the winter on train rides and benches. Since mental health

disorders are more commonly described as a female experience, she appeals to third wave feminism in describing a relative condition as she interacts with her own physical spaces.

V. Conclusion

Satrapi's success among American audiences is unmatched in its universal quality and presentation. Though perhaps equally popular as *Reading Lolita*, *Persepolis* reaches different audiences in her mixture of literary forms. She appeals to the post 9/11 American reader in her discussion of physical violence in how it interacts with space, memory and identity. She also pulls in the 2000s modern American reader in aspects of communication and her depiction of private and public personas. Lastly, she reaches the third wave feminist by describing her gendered experience of life in both Eastern and Western societies, while emphasizing the discrimination of women as a result of corrupted religious fundamentalism. It is within these forms that Satrapi's popularity attracts individual aspects of the American reader, rather than appealing to familiar collective portrayals of the East by the West.

Conclusion: Instigating Cultural Growth

Many scholars have discussed the recent influx of diasporic Middle Eastern literature after the September 11th terrorist attacks. Iranian women's memoirs, in particular, are carefully examined for their popularity and significant contribution to the Western literary landscape. In their emergence, these memoirs appeal to American audiences as a direct result of the sociopolitical environment of the early 2000s following the attacks and the development of new social spaces and movements. It is within their environment that Americans look outward in finding the truth about Middle Eastern countries and their cultures.

In this thesis, I closely analyzed the memoirs *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, by Azar Nafisi (2003) and *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003; 2004; 2007) and discussed the current critical debates for their success. Additionally, I also attempted to provide a complete overview of the social and political environment of the United States at the time these memoirs were released—arguing their success in according to how they engage readers with aspects and effects of the American sociopolitical environment. Impactful on a substantial scope, the 20th century political conflicts in Iran pushed Iranians to leave their homes, which formed a diasporic community in Western countries. As a result, the Iranian, especially female, experience of navigating through multiple sociopolitical spheres made these memoirs particularly appealing to the contentious atmosphere of post 9/11 America.

In my analysis, I ultimately prove that the success of *Reading Lolita* and *Persepolis* is closely attributed to how Iranian memoirs portray identity through spheres of trauma, memory, femininity, and societal norms. It is within these spheres that

American readers find their works appealing, due America's increasing internal conflict that was a response to xenophobic nationalism, a new cyber-social era, and the establishment of the third wave of Western feminism. Many critics argue for the success of these memoirs in their portrayal of familiar, exotic images of Iranian women and culture, but they do not explain the surge of Iranian memoirs in the time they were released and the variety in themes discussed. Though valid and identifiable, the Orientalist argument provides a collective explanation for the Western success of these works, but I attempt to look at the personal aspects of these texts that appeal to individual American readers. I would like to note that I don't argue the agency of these works, as they relate to a Western appeal. The words of Satrapi, Nafisi, Parsipur, and others would be just as valid and impactful if they were not popular among Western audiences. Nevertheless, in their use of hybrid spaces and discussion, they are effective at informing a global audience about a culture often negatively portrayed.

Previous depictions of Iran, even before the 9/11 attacks, considered the country to be explosive, harmful, and as Satrapi emphasizes in her memoir, "evil" (195). One decade before the attacks, Betty Mahmoody's, *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) portrays an innocent, American woman trapped by the brutish hands of an Islamic Iranian. Stemming from the Iranian Hostage Crisis (1979-1981), Mahmoody formulates the hostile and ignorant American gaze on Iran and perpetuates negative stereotypes of the Middle East. Roughly two decades later, a popular American TV show, *Shahs of Sunset* (2012) provided audiences with a Kardashian-esque depiction of Iranians; for seven seasons, the show followed the lives of six Iranian Americans living in Los Angeles and their hilarious family dynamics. The striking contrast between this show and

Mahmoody's biography (translated into film) reveals an active change in American opinion towards Iranian culture and society. It is within this context that I argue for the sheer impact of Iranian exilic memoirs on American society. As they provided a personal and social appeal to American society in the early 2000s, Iranian memoirs, such as *Reading Lolita* and *Persepolis* expanded the American mindset.

Aside from their appeal to American audiences in their structure, form, or use of Western literary canon, the success of Iranian authors such as Azar Nafisi and Marjane Satrapi can be identified through a reader-response lense. According to Richard Beach, author of "A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories" (1993), "Pragmatic use of a text entails an ability...to voluntarily select texts and consciously respond according to their own...needs and interests." I assert that the sociopolitical climate of the United States in the early 2000s facilitated a need and desire for readers to seek out literature that rectifies the instability and insecurity of the 9/11 attacks and depicts the influence of multiple social spheres and beliefs. Iranian female diasporic memoirs, as they are written, service this community in that they intertwine identity with the above aspects. Thus, in seeing the success or coming of age of the narrator and author, readers feel their own form of success in relating their own internal conflicts.

The work of these female writers is influential and impactful in multiple spheres. They communicate to their audience directly and indirectly, and they declare feminine agency for themselves and fellow Iranian women. Women's voices are suppressed in the history of most countries, and Iran is not an exception to this trend. According to Farzaneh Milani in her piece *Veils and Words, The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (1992), "Theirs was a private world, where self-expression, either bodily or

verbally, was confined within the accepted family circle” (46). While the conventions described by the ever-changing Iranian regime shifted between conservatism and Western-influenced liberalism, women’s verbal and physical capabilities were continuously stifled. The release of these memoirs, as Iranian women were forced out of the country, publicized their voices and strengthened their narrative. These women not only describe their experience, but also pioneer a rewriting of Iranian history through the Western lens. The overwhelming American response to their writing exposes an element of transnational social progress among modern global society.

As it stands, America still has vast room for improvement in its depiction of Middle Eastern cultures, and the current political climate does little to rectify hostile relations between Iran and the United States. President Trump’s notorious Muslim Ban displayed a political determination to drive a wedge between American and Middle Eastern cultures and justify Western superiority. The result, however, differed greatly from that of the Bush administration’s declaration of evil. Instead of directing hate crimes towards Middle Eastern Americans and spreading xenophobia, the Trump ban elicited a strong activist reaction. Among other notable responses, thousands of protesters took their posters and voices to American airports and state capitols to demand a cancellation of the executive order (Bacon and Gomez, 2017). Employees at organizations such as Google and Lyft also staged nationwide walkouts in protest (Weise 2017). In addition, Iranian Organizations such as the Pars Equality Center, the Iranian American Bar Association, and the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, among other Iranian individuals filed federal lawsuits against Trumps travel ban, joining American groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union in a legal pursuit of action (“end the travel

ban” 2017). This overwhelmingly negative response, coupled by the congressional election of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar reveals an underlying social change among American society—a transformation that can be widely contributed to emergent Middle Eastern voices in literature and popular culture.

My purpose in writing this thesis is not to applaud America’s literary and societal growth, but to highlight the result of Iranian women’s determination. Though the United States and other Western countries still maintain a hostile relationship with Iran, facets of Iranian art and entertainment aim to combat negative stereotypes. Ultimately, the work and success of writers such as Nafisi and Satrapi, and the subsequent changes in American society, shows that progress can be spread through the words of talented and courageous Middle Eastern women.

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