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# THE OTHERING OF MUSLIM WOMEN BY WESTERN AND EASTERN SOCIETIES

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## Abstract



The post-9/11 memoirs of Malala Yousafzai's *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* intervene in and offer pertinent experiences for the Western discourses of Muslim women. These two life-stories both revolutionize and further the Othering of Muslim women, and this thesis will utilize the genre as a lens through which to assess how biographical literatures can supplement post-9/11 Western Orientalism in the misrepresentation of Muslim women in Pakistan and Iran. In addition, this thesis will also disrupt the discourse of Orientalism with critical attention to relevant Occidental critical texts and questions, and ultimately maintain a goal in its assessment of rethinking current stereotypes of Muslim women in Western and Middle Eastern countries.

In my argument, I will demonstrate that centuries'-old Othering, as defined by Edward Said, or "subalternization," as coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has not disappeared but merely come to target those of Muslim faith and Arab descent. Fortunately, emerging Muslim female voices and writers over the past two decades and an increased availability to Westerners of such works pose challenges to this kind of continued Othering. Given the vast scope of such an inquiry, this work will limit its focus both geographically on Muslim women from Iran and Pakistan and temporally on the fifteen years since the early 2000s, as the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 acted as a catalyst for a more extreme version of Western Othering towards Muslim peoples. The actual experiences, lives, and opinions of Muslim women cannot be cast as

universal – thus, I will focus on individual experiences as examples of potentially broader themes.

By no means comprehensive, this work aims to prove that education, as exemplified by Malala and Azar, can help transform the current Othering of Muslim women into an understanding of the complexities that make up every Muslim woman, and every *person*, across the globe. Overall, Malala's and Nafisi's works help enlarge our perceptions by bringing into relief important and relevant discourses, and by personally engaging dominant cultural perceptions not always available (or visible) in the West.

## Introduction



“To all the girls who have faced injustice and been silenced. Together we will be heard.” The opening dedication of Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography, *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up For Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, serves as a source of empowerment for access to education as well as a message of hope to Muslim women across the globe who face the brutal effects of discrimination, degradation, and lack of rights to stand together against those that oppress or isolate them. Two rights often taken from Muslim women are the freedom of choice and the right to an education – basic needs that are in fact so essential that the absence of them in numerous societies elicit responses from powerful women such as Malala Yousafzai and Azar Nafisi, who work to reform the discussion of female rights in Muslim communities. Yousafzai and Nafisi are two among the many voices working to end the Othering of Muslim women, and their personal and professional contributions to the discourse have revolutionized how the West views Muslim women today.

## **Orientalism**

One of the major reasons women, and Muslim women especially, must fight for their right to be heard on the global stage is due to the power relationships present between the female gender and patriarchal systems, and Muslim peoples and Western hegemonic influences. As defined by Edward Said, such “positional superiority...puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (Said 7). Said’s choice of language here of “Westerner” and the proverbial dominant “he” perfectly encapsulates

how the Orient, or for this argument likening the Orient to the female, is “more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (7). A human being’s value defined within the context of a hierarchical relationship sets the stage for Yousafzai and Nafisi’s discourses: they each have to live and participate within a patriarchal-circumscribed space of gender norms that influence international ways of how Eastern, and particularly Muslim, women are viewed. Although Orientalism may have diminished over the years, the school of thought stretches back centuries in that the degradation of women in society may be argued as commonplace for a majority of our existence. Such biases are formidable because that context demonstrates the starting position of Muslim women such as Yousafzai and Nafisi in the debate for equality: each begins her tale from the position of being a woman *and* an Easterner.

To assess this reality methodologically, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) will inform the methodology of this thesis because it explains and critiques the process of Othering a culture and people; that is, Othering as a discourse that expresses a discriminatory, patronizing, and oftentimes subconscious bias towards those who identify as non-American, non-European, non-west, non-white, non-Christian, and non-male. Our female authors fall into *all* these categories, and Said’s assertion that Othering and Orientalism still runs rampant in the popular western imagination remains true half a century later – especially in these concepts’ and practices’ influence over the lives of not only these two women, but Muslim women everywhere. Both the personal lives as well as the written works of Pakistani Yousafzai and Iranian Nafisi engage in many facets of the Muslim women’s rights debate, as well as offer much personalized insight into Muslim women’s experiences in Western and Eastern worlds and challenge the continued Othering against members of the East. For context, “The East” is a place historically categorized

by Western powers as a locale coated in mystery, sexuality, violence, and difference and has been Othered, or subalternized, for centuries (Said). Since 9/11, this ever-present subalternization towards those of Muslim faith and Arab descent in the West has only heightened.

Although criticized<sup>1</sup> for excluding women from his analysis of Othering and the Orient, Said's three-fold discussion on the Orient can also apply to the Muslim women debate. In his Introduction, Said delineates the following qualifications about the East: 1) "it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality;" 2) "ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied;" and 3) "one ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths, which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away" (4-6). Although too much to unpack in the length of this work, the notion of myth versus reality, the significance of power configurations, and the importance of the inclusion of *all* structures (truth and falsehoods) is critical to bear in mind when analyzing both the common (mis)perceptions and realities of the lives of Muslim women. This holds especially true for the lives, works, and analysis of Yousafzai and Nafisi, as their realities and global images can radically differ at times.

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<sup>1</sup> Among scholars who have critiqued Said's lack of women, the sources include: Joanna Liddle and Shirin Rai, "Feminism, Imperialism and Orientalism: the challenge of the 'Indian woman,'" University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom; Art historian John MacKenzie "Orientalism: history, theory and the arts," p. xv (Manchester: Manchester University Press)

Although Yousafzai and Nafisi come from different backgrounds, their biographies show striking similarities in the ways that they engage a patriarchal worldview to become emergent voices in a new discourse. First, Malala Yousafzai, the 19-year-old Pakistani girl known worldwide for her advocacy of female education, is a devout Muslim, the youngest Nobel Laureate, and “the girl who was shot by the Taliban.” Besides these titles of fame, Yousafzai is also a daughter, a sister, and an inhabitant of the U.K. since 2012. With these titles also come the societal labels of Pakistan where “every man is your ‘brother’ and every woman your ‘sister’” (5). Yousafzai was “torn from the country that [she] loves” due to her “brothers” the Taliban, an ironic twist on the community comradery inherent to Pakistani culture (5). Yousafzai may be viewed as a “sister” to the Western world because of her defense of “Western” ideals (education, women’s rights, freedom of speech), but it’s important to note that the familial tags of Pakistan connect Yousafzai to the East as well as the West. Yousafzai’s alliance to *both* “sides” of the globe is a critical detail when considering her role and view on the Othering of Muslim women, as her stance encompasses two different societies of belief.

Second, an influential counterpart of Yousafzai’s is Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, an established Iranian scholar, professor of English Literature, published author, mother, wife, and American citizen since 2008. While in Iran during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Nafisi “chose seven of her best and most committed students and invited them to come to [her] home every Thursday morning to discuss literature” – an act that created a “family” that would address questions of female empowerment and the Othering of Muslim women on the Iranian and global scales (Nafisi 3). Educated in both the United States and Iran, Nafisi, too, is a blend of both Western and Eastern thought. Her position in two societies traditionally deemed radically different helps give Nafisi an influential perspective on the Othering of Muslim women debate.

So, despite the variances of their respective lives, the life-stories of both Yousafzai and Nafisi offer relevant foci in that their works revolutionized the discourses of female education and human rights, bring to global attention the struggles and oppression of Middle Eastern women, and provide insights into some realities of “subalternization” and the Other through their simultaneous residencies in Western countries and promotion of Muslim women and other oppressed groups’ rights.

When Yousafzai’s and Nafisi’s experiences within Middle Eastern school systems were recounted on the global stage, their voices served as a way to amplify the voices of many Muslim women who don’t get the opportunity to speak out about the Othering they endure and the trials and tribulations they undergo. These women are representative of two different backgrounds and experiences – one was unwillingly brought to fame as a “disempowered” young girl who turned a miraculous survival born of “revolution” into an international call for action (Yousafzai), while the other spoke from a position of cultural and scholarly authority to take a stance that she knew would be politically controversial (Nafisi). These two experiences of Muslim women by no means represent all Arab/Muslim female experiences in the Middle East or the West, but reading and engaging their works can contribute much to the discussion of the Other, the subaltern, and the universal importance of the freedoms of choice and education. Both Yousafzai and Nafisi are Muslim women who experienced variations of the rules of morality and purity laws, discriminatory treatment, and ostracizing behavior in their respective home countries as well as in their new Western abodes (Pakistan, Iran, U.S., U.K.), experiences that many Muslim women across the globe face to this day.

And the number of these Western-Othered women is only increasing. Since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, those of Arab descent and from the East have experienced an



intensification of Othering and subalternization in numerous nations of both the East *and* West. Culture and origin dictate many Western and Eastern perceptions of worth, and within these vantages, an Arab or Muslim identity is a weighty one to possess. As with any society, the West is riddled with biases; but by drawing specific attention to Yousafzai and Nafisi, this thesis will attempt to reshape biases into new perspectives, and perceptions of worth into the universal value of human life. Opinions towards Yousafzai and Nafisi are controversial in nature, and just as these two female authors have been “used” to further both liberal and conservative doctrines, so, too, has the symbolism of Muslim women been “used” for furthering Western biases, either by casting the women as victims or as models of impurity.

Muslim women not only receive the pity and discrimination of the Western world in regard to faith, dress, and social behavior, but (as delineated by Muslim women life-stories) they also face much exclusion, degrading treatment, and mental and physical abuses within their home countries. In a panel presentation<sup>2</sup> at the University of Colorado, Boulder by the Ex-Muslims of North America, Hiba, a woman from Lebanon, detailed the experiences of her first 18 years of life as filled with abuse, isolation, and religious and gender repression in her home country at the hands of her Muslim parents and surrounding community. She felt so oppressed (even with full access to education) that she fled her country in the middle of the night to come to the United States. At the same panel, a Saudi Arabian woman, Gada, echoed this feeling in her account of experiences in her home country, feeling generally as if she had to obey a commandment or compulsory obligation in the actions and responsibilities of her everyday life.

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<sup>2</sup> Haider, Sarah, Ghada, Hiba Krisht. “Normalizing Dissent: Islam, Modesty, and Feminism.” Normalizing Dissent Tour. Boulder, CO. October 5, 2017. Guest Lecture.

A focus on (and remembrance of) the individuals and personal accounts of such women is critical in order to understand particular and potentially universal realities that may govern the day-to-day lives and struggles of many Muslim women, and to provide needful insights into the cultural misrepresentations of Muslim women in both Western and Middle Eastern modern societies over the past fifteen years. Such an assessment needs to begin by identifying cultural misrepresentations in the media sources of literature, news outlets, films, and television as well as within the everyday life fascination with “the Orient” that seems to be so pervasive in both today’s western and eastern societies.

### **Subalternity**

The idea that Othering may differentiate but subalternization subjugates underlies this thesis; that is, I follow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her definition of subalternization: “a diminishment of a different society or culture for the purpose of maintaining the observer’s own cultural narrative” (Spivak). Further, a “subaltern” should be understood as one who is deemed lesser, unimportant, excluded from society, and ultimately, Other. Although Said’s “Other” applies to all Oriental persons, the term subaltern is especially tied to Muslim women as women are often the “lesser” gender in society as well as the ones “excluded” from society to the private spheres of the home i.e. *purdah*, the “segregation or seclusion [of women], wearing the veil” (Yousafzai 317).

Othering and subalternization are fundamental components of Pakistani, Iranian, and Western societies that often appear in a variety of both obvious and subliminal ways. Yousafzai experienced blatant subalternization when the Taliban required all females to cease going to school, including herself, but she experienced subliminal Othering when she became known

across the West as primarily the “girl who was shot by the Taliban” rather than as her desired title of the “girl who stood up for education.” In this way, Yousafzai experienced more “outright” Othering in the East and “subtle” Othering from the West – a circumstance not universal, but perhaps more prevalent in the lives of Muslim women than in those of Western women. The first chapter of this thesis will address the global climate regarding Pakistan and the Othering that takes place at the national levels, and then narrow in to focus on Yousafzai and the dual Western and Eastern subalternizations she has experienced throughout her life.

In addition to Yousafzai, Nafisi also experienced outright Othering in the East when she was forced to wear the veil at Tehran University in Iran; subtle Othering infiltrated her life when she didn’t feel at home at her U.S. university because her focus towards her home of Iran was a subject that Americans “didn’t understand.” The subalternization of Nafisi will be addressed in the second chapter of this thesis after a brief explanation of Iran’s global experiences with outright and subtle Othering to give space and context to Nafisi’s life narrative. The apparent and subliminal Othering trends found in both Yousafzai and Nafisi’s experiences can potentially offer new perspectives of how, when, and by whom Muslim women are subjected to discrimination and misrepresentation.

Yousafzai and Nafisi’s situations demonstrate that even when societies attempt to improve – and even identify and help – the subaltern’s situation (the West making Malala famous as “the girl who was shot by the Taliban”), they can often further ostracize the group or individual from others in their own societies (Spivak). Even the Westerners’ act of characterizing a group as Other in the first place (Yousafzai and Nafisi as *Middle Eastern* authors) romanticizes a group of people and their need, which causes their further distancing of the excluded from their

society – Yousafzai and Nafisi being “in-between” in identity in their Western homes of the U.K. and America as well as their “original” homes of Pakistan and Iran.

The first and second chapters of this work will also further discuss how just as Westerners too often accidentally ostracize and label groups like Muslim women as subaltern, so, too, does the West put beliefs and narratives in the mouths of Others in the guise of a “support” which, more often than not, leads to Western thinkers, colonizers, and people “speak[ing] of (or for) the subaltern women” (Spivak 271). This subtle and often unrecognized action, again, only further ostracizes and isolates Muslim women from *all* cultures. Whether in the business world, academia, or life in general, women, especially Muslim women, are consistently deemed as less important than men, less intelligent, or insultingly, are accepted into places solely *because* they are women, which is a kind of prejudice in the name of affirmative action. For instance, Nafisi left Tehran University in protest of wearing the veil to teach, and after her departure, the university attempted to convince her to return. But this seeming “remorse” by the university was a façade – the offer of a job was never a statement of repentance and acquiescence to Nafisi’s social desires; Tehran University simply had a gender diversity requirement to fulfill. Given experiences such as Nafisi’s, the female gender itself may be viewed as a subaltern, in which case Yousafzai, Nafisi, and Muslim women across the globe fight for not only their own “group’s” rise out of subalternity, but unconsciously for the equality of *all* women as well.

### **Secular and Islamic Feminism**

Due to their “Oriental” origins, both Yousafzai and Nafisi face instances of biases and cultural normativity that foster the logic of Otherness and that perpetuate the practice of Othering against

Muslim women. As scholar Margot Badran states, “Globalization and diasporization are producing multiple identities and sliding intersections of ‘feminist’ concern that are increasingly hard to deny” (Badran 220). Amongst the formation of multiple identities, the role of Islam within these global frames is one of the most wildly debated topics today. A new discussion that has emerged both in Islam and the Muslim women rights debate is the relationship between Islamic and secular feminism, with Islamic feminism defined as:

a new discourse or interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in *ijtihad*, or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur’an and other religious texts. (Badran 3)

And secular feminism as:

a model of feminism located within the context of a secular territorial nation-states... and [which] has been action-oriented, engaging in social and political militancy. (Badran 3)

A common misconception in this discussion is that Islamic feminism does not lie within the broader topic of secular feminism – a falsity that in many instances serves to undermine the reform because this view implies that Muslim women do not want the social and political human rights of secular feminism. The reality, though, is that many Muslim women want just treatment in *all* spheres of their lives – social, political, *and* religious. Islamic feminism is widely addressed and debated, and I hope to critically engage with this topic through works such as Amina Wadud’s *Qur’an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, Margot Badran’s *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, and Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*. These three works support the idea that Islamic feminism acts as a valid form of empowerment for women – in addition to Malala Yousafzai’s

personal beliefs – as well as serve as contributions of the kind of individual perspectives I hope to incorporate and give voice to in this thesis.

Yousafzai is a devout Muslim who finds empowerment and encouragement within the Islamic faith. She believes: “We Pashtuns are a religion-loving people, [but] because of the Taliban, the whole world [claims] that we are terrorists. This is not the case. We are peace-loving” (Yousafzai 141). As a “religion-loving” person, Yousafzai’s Islamic faith exemplifies how her contentment and devoutness within the belief-system of Islam (“she prayed to God every night to give [her] strength”) serves to enhance her advocacy efforts and empower her as a female, rather than detract from them as perhaps predominantly Western stereotypes and assumptions would perceive (141-142). The young advocate exhibits both secular and Islamic feminism as her belief that “God would protect [her]” as she spoke “for [her] rights, and the rights of girls” exemplifies the human rights component of secular feminism, as well as the Islamic feminist interpretation of the Qur’an that God would protect her when combatting the traditional Pakistani patriarchal system (141).

On the other hand, there are those in the debate who believe secular and Islamic feminism cannot –or often fail to – coexist. Among such believers is Azar Nafisi, who describes how she finds that Muslim women often face more disparate treatment than not though their engagement with Islam and its practitioners – a stance which is predominantly based off her own experiences and the life stories of her female students. In accordance with Nafisi’s beliefs, groups such as “Ex-Muslims of North America” (EXMNA) believe feminism (either secular or Islamic) to be rare in Islam because they posit the religion is inherently structured for patriarchal society’s norms and desires. In fact, numerous women in EXMNA found it so difficult to find empowerment in the Islamic faith and the interpretation of the sacred book of the Qur’an within

their communities (even with writers such as Amina Wadud who break down and interpret the femininity in the Qur'an) that they saw departure from the faith as their only option.

But Nafisi and EXMNA are not stagnant in their beliefs – both acknowledge that their stance on Islam is not universally upheld by all Muslim women. In fact, Nafisi references ways that her students' identities are positively shaped by their religious beliefs in her memoir, and EXMNA's website contains numerous articles of Muslim figures they admire – for instance, a 2013 satirical article published in Malala's favor (Shahid). The disagreement among Arab women in their opinions on Islamic and secular feminism and their (perhaps unlikely) acceptance of a woman's individual path to empowerment is both indicative of the complexity of the Muslim women debate and serves as a model for how perspectives about the Othering of women should be inclusive of the full range of the Othered's views.

Amongst a myriad of opinions, both Yousafzai and Nafisi experienced a common adversarial reaction to their beliefs – Yousafzai faced intense discrimination from the Taliban in the name of Islam, and Nafisi engaged with Iranian female students she admires who feel empowered within their Islamic faith (counter to many of Nafisi's beliefs). These experiences reflect many aspects of the discussion's spectrum, as in both the Western and Eastern worlds there appears to be no "right" answer or singular opinion in the faith and gender discussion. In the third chapter of this thesis, I hope to contribute information and perspective to both "sides," interrupt the narrative of Orientalism with instances of Occidentalism, and focus on education about all aspects of the debate as crucially important in avoiding generalizations that can Other Muslim women just as much, if not more, as can assumptions by Western and Eastern societies. Muslim women disagree about the Othering of Muslim women, and Yousafzai and Nafisi can serve as excellent models for this wider conversation.

## Life-Writing

Literary methods and genre also play an important role in the conversation of the Othering of Muslim women, especially in the genre of life-writing. Life-writing is a “branch of auto/biographical literature” that “has flourished since the decolonization of European empires,” and has come to contain many portrayals of Muslim women (Moore-Gilbert xi). This genre encompasses both the autobiography *I am Malala*, and the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and by analyzing these works through their writing style I hope to discover how these self-written narratives can apply to major cultural and political dialogues – including the discourse of Othering. Interestingly, the precursor to post-colonial life-writing were slave narratives; this Western/colonizer appropriation of a colonized literary genre is a poignant point of departure for my discussion of misrepresentation, appropriation, and ultimately, Othering. I hope to utilize and expand Moore-Gilbert’s understanding of post-colonial reading to encompass Muslim women and analyze their role in the dialogue that he sets up. Although numerous autobiographies and non-fiction about and by Muslim women exist (such as *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* by Lila Abu-Lughod, *Feminism in Islam* by Margot Badran, *Women and Gender in Islam* by Leila Ahmed), the realms of post-colonial studies and the genre of life-writing are not often assessed together, especially in conjunction with Edward Said’s work on Orientalism. Thus, texts like Yousafzai’s autobiography and Nafisi’s memoir have not often been considered in relation to genre studies. This thesis will seek to bridge both kinds of analysis.

Both Yousafzai’s and Nafisi’s respective works might be considered post-colonial literary discourse, and – just as Moore-Gilbert focuses on post-colonial life-writing’s relationship to Western beliefs and narrative conceptions of the Other and the Self – so, too, do Yousafzai’s and Nafisi’s works tie into these prevalent and wide-reaching narratives. As Moore-Gilbert



posits with reference to scholar Debra Kelly's recent study of North African autobiographical discourses: "Women share many of the characteristics of the colonized subject... to the extent that some commentators have spoken of the need for 'self-decolonization' of the female subject" (Moore-Gilbert xv). The idea of women serving as colonial *and* post-colonial figures adds another perspective to the discourse of the Other, and demonstrates how literary structures and forms can be extremely useful and applicable in analyzing how the complex Othering of Muslim women occurs within various media realms, especially when it comes to Yousafzai's autobiography and Nafisi's collection of memoirs. If properly analyzed in relation to the broader context of post-colonial theory, I believe that Yousafzai's and Nafisi's voices and their media platforms can demonstrate how the Othering of Muslim women remains subliminally present in all aspects of both Western and Eastern societies today. The hope for a modern world that recognizes and learns from its past injustices can, and in numerous ways already does, exist.

## Chapter 1

### Pakistan and Malala Yousafzai



#### Pakistan: Background, Politics, and Gender

In 2013, the U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had a very important Skype conversation with the person who would become the youngest Nobel Laureate in history. Shortly after being shot by the Taliban Islamic militant group, Malala Yousafzai spoke to one of the leaders of what has traditionally been described as the free world, and related not only her life experiences, but also addressed her aspirations for the worldwide promotion of education. With Ban Ki-Moon as a representative of the U.N. – a post-WWII “western” creation – and Yousafzai as a representative of education – herself a post 9/11 western symbol of democracy – the conversation between these two popular public personalities who both originate from an Otherized East can serve as a representation of the cooperation of the West and the East working together to create a global dialogue.

The U.N. is a complex entity comprised of both Western and Eastern nations with a dual identity similar to that of Malala’s.<sup>3</sup> Although the U.N. includes, and its Secretary General originates, from non-Western states, and the functions and powers of the United Nations Charter reflect humanitarian-based principles of international peace, action against aggressors, the regulation of armaments, and the investigation of disputes, the U.N. is still viewed as primarily a

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<sup>3</sup> With 190 active members, and 15 members on the Council, the U.N. is comprised of a mix of traditionally-labeled Eastern and Western countries. The Council consists of five permanent member states – China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States – and ten non-permanent members elected for two-year terms by the General Assembly. These temporary members are currently Bolivia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, and Uruguay.

Western association by many powerful nations and individuals. This physical hybridity of the traditional Eastern and Western binaries serves as an excellent counterpoint to Yousafzai's own hybridity and that of gender roles – there is no one set definition that determines how a person, woman, nation, or group of countries should be.

Although there have been a few outspoken human rights groups against Western imperialism, Western-posed “questionable”<sup>4</sup> world leaders such as Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez and Libya's President Muammar al-Qaddafi dominate the global dialogue. Although these two men have been dictators, their voices on the global stage have been some of the most vocal as there hasn't been much critique coming from democratic or mainstream sources of global organizations such as the United Nations. This lack of other non-West commentators could be because Chávez and al-Qaddafi's poor reputations paired with this topic have made this subject taboo, so as a result, these radical and open critiques of the U.N. for its Western- and euro-centric behavior serve as the main point of context for the debate. These opinionated accusations both discredit the call-out of Eastern bias (based on the controversial people the critiques stem from) while simultaneously supply the “East” with a globally-recognized voice. The irony that Qaddafi and Chávez served as authoritative voices for this conversation – much in the way that they dictate(d) actions and peoples in their own countries – demonstrates that binaries (extremes of a certain viewpoint) are not the answer to solving Eastern Othering; hybridity, rather, offers a viable solution as in the form of Malala.

To shed some light on the current, binary-focused dialogue, though, in 2006, a day after U.S. President George W. Bush spoke during the onset of the Iraqi war, Chávez addressed the

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<sup>4</sup> In the eyes of the U.S. and other Western countries, the geopolitical actions and social underpinnings of Chávez and al-Qaddafi often go against ingrained and socially accepted Western moral and ethical norms.

assembly of the United Nations and stated: “The devil came here yesterday, and it smells of sulfur still today” in reference to the then-president of the United States. Chávez’s open critique of Western powers in this speech served as a platform for President Mahmoud Ahmedinijad of Iran, who in 2012 entered the U.N. Assembly and also spoke of the U.N.’s biases in favor of the West and against the East. In 2012, news reporter David Ariosto of the Cable News Network (CNN) reported that Ahmedinijad “managed to draw American ire with generalized comments about its election spending as well as with comments about inequality of U.N. leadership” in regard to the balance of East and West nations (Ariosto). To carry on this trend to 2009, al-Qaddafi in a 90-minute speech to the U.N. assembly not only “scolded” the U.N. and Security Council as a whole – stating in Arabic that the group of 15 nation states be called the “terror council” instead – but also proceeded to shred the U.N. resolution of the time in an act of defiance against the euro-centrism of the organization (Macfarquhar). Qaddafi’s critique of American and Western superpowers echoed the impassioned 1960’s speech of President Fidel Castro of Cuba, illustrating how East and West tensions have been present across the globe ever since the U.N.’s formation in 1946.

Although these leaders have no standing among humanitarian-minded U.N. members, their complaints of euro-centrism within the U.N. were perhaps relevant contributions to the East and West Othering debate, as those complaints originated from explicitly patriarchal figures who touched upon global concerns of Eastern underrepresentation and Western bias. Such negative feelings towards Western, capitalistic hegemonies are not rare, even among U.N. member states. For example, Yousafzai’s home of Pakistan joined the U.N. in 1947 and even now serves as a charter member, but the nation state has consistently conflicted with Western powers, especially its superpower ally of the United States, since its mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century induction. This tense

relationship has fostered much of the hate and discrimination between the two sides of the globe that Yousafzai and others like her strive to combat, but discovering an end to such animosity proves incredibly challenging.

In addition to Malala, Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States from 2008 to 2011, also tried to decrease the amount of global Othering through his international status. But despite Yousafzai's and Haqqani's attempts to bridge the East/West divide and their domestic attempts to navigate and improve this relationship, both political figures face the inexorability of the Othering debate. Haqqani describes the tense U.S.-Pakistani relations as "magnificent delusions" – Pakistan chased an alliance with the U.S. in hopes of acquiring security against its major foe, India, while the U.S. believed aiding Pakistan would change the nature of the nation's priorities and objectives as a whole (Haqqani). Neither agenda proved fruitful, and the "delusions" of each side's anticipated outcomes served only to increase tension between the West and the East, especially in the past decade. The proliferation of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan occurred as a posited result of the Kashmir territory dispute and the West's lack of involvement therein, and the Pakistani focus on India can be said to have allowed for the toleration of Islamist groups within Pakistan's borders, hence the rise of the Taliban.

For context, the Taliban began as an Afghani militant group that arose out of the Iraq war, but as with most ideologies, the group's influence spread and made significant impacts, especially within Pakistan. There are many subsets of the Taliban existing in the Middle East and Pakistan today, but the "largest and deadliest militant umbrella organization in Pakistan" is a subset of the Taliban called the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – an "agglomerate of more than 40 Islamist and Pashtun tribal factions from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas

(FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK)” (Cassman). The TTP is closely associated with Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, and has severely impacted the nation on both domestic and international scales.

Since the U.N. alliance in 1947, the U.S. has enlisted Pakistan as a military ally on only a few occasions – the Cold War (1954-1972), the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan (1979-1989), and the war against terrorism (2001-present). In each case, “the U.S. motive for seeking Pakistani alliance has been different for Pakistan’s reason for accepting it” (Haqqani); a common trope that we see in Malala’s or Haqqani’s attempts to aid their own people is that the typical responses they received were opposite than what they expected and/or contrary to their original aims. This intrinsic disconnect and the constant disappointment of both nations towards the other could be viewed as fostering the political tension present between the U.S. and Pakistan today – Pakistan is disenchanted with the West and its “empty” promises, just as the U.S. is frustrated with the East’s lack of “progress.”

Even attempts to mend this divide have caused more harm than good, as can be seen by Haqqani’s deleterious experience in attempting to redefine Pakistan’s international relationships. During his service, Haqqani “sought to overcome the bitterness of the past in order to help lay the foundations for a long-term partnership” between Pakistan and the United States, but instead of appreciation for his efforts in office, the people of Pakistan met the global representative’s actions with animosity and distrust. Pakistan’s security forces “saw [Haqqani] working for American rather than Pakistani interests,” and this belief came to permeate the media, eventually leading to Haqqani’s resignation after charges of unnationalistic behavior were made against him. This response is almost identical to that which met Malala’s efforts in her fight for gender equality and female education. As Malala attempted to aid her people and the Pakistani

community at large, the nation pushed back, the Taliban accused her of being corrupted by the West, and she was exiled from her home in addition to being violently abused within her nation's borders.

The Pakistani peoples' reaction to Haqqani's and Yousafzai's respective "collaboration" with a Western power or Western ideas demonstrates how much stereotypes and past perceptions dominate numerous global relations today. Although Haqqani's goal was to aid the Pakistani people, he was figuratively lynched for forwarding policies that could potentially favor the United States, even in a situation where Pakistan was the one to benefit most from the partnership. In fact, U.S. Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson all questioned the U.S. benefits of an alliance with Pakistan during their respective terms. By the same token, Malala was persecuted for trying to aid the Pakistani people in ways that would benefit women, and thus the success of the nation as a whole. As Yousafzai (and Nafisi for that matter) suggests, higher levels of education and employment in the female population of a nation often improve the economy, social relations, and areas of development of the region as a result.

Despite its status of "ally" to Pakistan, the United States is still associated with Western stereotypes of capitalistic greed and self-serving mentalities which arose from years of mistrust and valid moments of disappointment to the Pakistani people. For example, one source of an anti-U.S. (anti-Western) viewpoint began with the failure of the United States to provide Pakistan's first governor-general Muhammad Ali Jinnah the \$2 billion aid package he requested in 1947 (the U.S. gave him \$10 million instead), and continued as the U.S. refused to aid Pakistan in its wars against India, even though India was also an ally of the United States at the time and to this day. Misconceptions on both sides fostered the Othering so present today, just as the

misinterpretation of Haqqani and Yousafzai's actions fostered animosity towards humanitarian-focused models of change. Viewing one another as a consistent "betrayal" for the past 60 years has affected the U.S. and Pakistan partnership arguably more than any other conflict. The mounting tension between the U.S. and Pakistan culminated in the different desires of the nations regarding the outcome of the Afghanistan war, and both Haqqani and Yousafzai can confirm that ever since this discrepancy, there has been an increase in "anti-American narratives" in Pakistan.

Today, such anti-American sentiments in Pakistan is further exacerbated by U.S.

President Donald J. Trump. In January 2018:

Mr. Trump repeated a long-standing gripe that Pakistan harbors terrorists America is fighting in Afghanistan, adding that it did not deserve American aid. A Pakistani official who clearly understood Mr. Trump's complaint said it was "incomprehensible." (The Economist 6)

Such animosity and mistrust go hand-in-hand with the Middle Eastern contempt for Western powers found in Yousafzai's narrative. Ex-ambassador Haqqani opines:

Instead of basing international relations on facts, Pakistanis have become accustomed to seeing the world through the prism of an Islamo-nationalist ideology. Even well-traveled, erudite, and articulate Pakistani officials echo this ideology without realizing that holding tight to these self-defeating ideas makes little impact on the rest of the world. (Haqqani)

The irony that attempts for improvement (as in the case of Haqqani or Yousafzai) between the East (Pakistan) and the West (United States, U.N.) have resulted in further tension is emblematic of the "self-defeating ideas" that cause people and nations to mistreat, and ultimately Other, one another. Whether in regard to political discourse or gender relations, this theme of a disconnect between Self and Other is predominant from the individual to the societal levels, and requires a change in perception in order for any progress to become attainable.



### **Malala Yousafzai and Interpreting *I am Malala***

A close reading of Yousafzai's autobiography reveals how Malala engages with this intricate Pakistani background. As a contribution to post-colonial literature situated within a discourse of Islamic and secular feminism by Middle Eastern women, Yousafzai's autobiography, *I am Malala*, offers a variety of insights into the levels of discrimination that Muslim women face from a young age. Published in the same year as her conversation with the Secretary General, Yousafzai's narrative is journal-like; her prose encompasses the day-to-day life of a young, 16-year-old Pakistani girl in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, one whose trials and successes in activism give the reader insight into the difficulties women confront in acquiring an education in one area of the Muslim world.

#### *Abuse and Mistreatment*

In this way, the personal and the political spill into one another in *I am Malala*, a text that thereby accomplishes what scholar Janet Gunn defines as the task of "Third-World autobiography" (one of the subjects of life-writing):

[It] differs in two respects from mainstream Western autobiography, both male and female. First it involves an unmasking or what I have called a denostalgizing of the past; second, it orients itself toward a liberated society in the future. In the first respect, it is a form of resistance literature; in the second, it is a form of utopian literature. (Moore-Gilbert xvi)

Yousafzai de-romanticizes and "unmasks" the common practices of both the Swat Valley and the United States in her work by incorporating powerful stories from both worlds in her narrative, unattached to any biases or personal commentary; Yousafzai lets the facts speak for themselves, and that freedom of interpretation hints at the "liberated society in the future"

characteristic of Third World autobiographical life-writing. For example, Malala describes some of the treatments of women in her village with just the simple lead-in, the Pakistani “code of conduct has a lot to answer for:”

A woman named Shahida who worked for [the Yousafzais] and had three small daughters told [Malala] that when she was only ten years old her father had sold her to an old man who already had a wife but wanted a younger one...; There was a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl called Seema. Everyone knew she was in love with a boy, and sometimes she would look at him from under her long dark lashes... In our society for a girl to flirt with any man brings shame on the family, though it’s all right for the man. We were told she had committed suicide, but we later discovered her own family had poisoned her...; The Taliban had even banned women from laughing out loud or wearing white shoes, as white was ‘a color that belonged to men.’ (Yousafzai 67-68)

These bias-free instances of female abuse and brutality in Yousafzai’s narrative serve as impactful moments of “resistance literature” – Shahida’s and Seema’s secondary biographical sources emphasize Yousafzai’s abuse and simultaneously add more voices to the growing vocal “crowd” of Othered Muslim women. By bringing to light (and to the media) these women’s stories, Malala de-nostalgizes the past (and present) of female mistreatment by showing that many Muslim women’s experiences don’t have the “happy ending” of hers (that is, if one considers her survival, escape, and subsequent trauma and exile “happy”). Yousafzai also reveals that the actions of the Taliban go beyond the “big gestures” of homicide or the destruction of ancient relics – they also control and dictate the day-to-day lives of civilians in ways that demonstrate the Othering of women on a “regular” basis. Consistent dictations of daily forms of female expression – such as laughter and shoe choice – is another form of the invasive and demeaning treatment of women.

By diving into the inner workings of Pakistani society (internal conflicts in school systems, the difficulties of political reform, economic hardships, everyday setbacks), the text also

offers insights into some realities of the “Muslim world:” we see Yousafzai and her father use their respective positions as schoolgirl, and political activist and teacher, to combat economic, religious, societal, and political pressures to educate girls within their hometown and circumvent the violent, adversarial Taliban. At another level, Malala’s story impacts the new wave of female voices that have emerged since 9/11, because her narrative describes the ways in which she and her family altered the world-wide perception of Pakistanis, and adds new perspectives to the global focus on the Taliban, female education, and gender equality. The book also dives into Malala’s thoughts and feelings during her time in Pakistan and the U.K., both in regard to her Islamic and Western, literal and metaphorical, garb. Whether referencing the “literal” as in the veil, or the “metaphorical” as in generalizations about Muslim women, the emergence of Yousafzai’s tale poignantly contributes understandings about *real* Muslim women’s lives to the discussions raised by feminine voices in the East.

### *Marriage and Relationships*

As the accredited scholar and professor of Anthropology and Women’s Studies at Columbia University Lila Abu-Lughod addresses in her description of a beaten wife, Khadija, there exists international influences that inform many of the marriage dynamics of Middle Eastern women in the Muslim world: “regional poverty, international tourism, and feminist gains in Europe (as well as high divorce rates)” being a few of the ones that play major roles in the relations between husband and wife (Abu-Lughod 206). Choice and feminism are not always common tropes within a Muslim or traditionally-oriented household, and the Othering of a wife into submission by a husband serves, more oftentimes than not, as the norm.

“I will protect your freedom, Malala. Carry on with your dreams” stated Malala’s father, Ziauddin, upon her questioning of why women could be abused and punished for something “she had nothing to do with” (Yousafzai 67-68). Yousafzai grew up in a very liberal Pakistani household – her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, “came from a backward village, yet through education and force of personality he made a good living [and] a name for himself” (23). Yousafzai resembles her father more than her pious mother, Toor Pekai Yousafzai, who “prays five times a day... disapproves of dancing... cannot read or write... [and] loves to decorate herself with pretty things” (22). On the surface, the relationship between Ziauddin and Toor Pekai seems to be a “conventional[ly] Eastern” one – the successful and ambitious man with his traditional and tactful housewife.

But as I dug deeper and as with most stereotypes, what appears on the surface is not reflective of reality. As spouses in the narrative, Malala’s parents, Ziauddin and Toor Pekai, seem to have an equal relationship: Ziauddin “shares everything” with his wife who “comes from a family of strong women as well as influential men;” “most Pashtun men never do this, as sharing problems with women is seen as weak” (22). Such a stereotype-reversing relationship can be interpreted as an emblematic instance of larger societal conversations – for instance, this level of communication between the two intertwined yet disagreeing partners of Toor Pekai and Ziauddin can reflect the communication needed between Eastern and Western trains of thoughts regarding stereotypes. By this, I mean that the appearance of the elder Yousafzais’ relationship and its subsequent reality debunks many assumptions about the domestic lives of Muslim women in the Middle East – as well as gives context for Malala’s upbringing – just as the actuality of Muslim relations can often debunk surface-level cultural stereotypes.

Ziauddin always encouraged Malala to go to school, advocate for women's rights, and stand up for anything and everything she believed in. The loving and empowering relationship between Malala and Ziauddin breaks down patriarchal stereotypes – Malala experienced an incredibly positive and uplifting life with a patriarchal figurehead, an experience contrary to many people's beliefs inside and outside the Middle East of a Muslim girl's home life. Rather than Taliban-inspired repression or Muslim-text-based patriarchy, Malala was actually inspired by the pro-feminism work that her father accomplished. Starting with the celebration of Malala's birth (typically birth celebrations are only for male children), Ziauddin encouraged female success to the girls that attended his school while also defending female rights, "literary societies and jirgas... the environment, [and] trying to save the [Swat] valley" to his male counterparts (23).

Such support and vocal determination demonstrates how Ziauddin, too, lies outside the realm of Middle Eastern gender roles. Just as with his daughter, Ziauddin defied male gender norms on multiple levels – post 9/11, pro-feminist and progressive men in the Middle East were known, as female scholar Margot Badran proposes, to "advocate [for the veil as] unveiling had a key ideological and symbolic value" (Badran 22). Ziauddin even departed from such pro-feminist males with his support of veiling being solely in regard to the covering's protectionary advantages against radicals like the Taliban or members within the Pakistani government. Ziauddin encouraged Malala to attend school *sans voile*, and by going against even the progressives of the time, Ziauddin embodied characteristics of a feminist man. As an influential Egyptian scholar, teacher, and feminist, Shaikh Muhammad 'Abduh states that this kind of behavior would "demonstrate that one could be both Muslim and modern, and that many traditional practices violate[s] the principles of Islam" (Badran 20).

Ziauddin's feminist loyalties and his subsequent cultural misrepresentation adds to the complexity of the Othering of *all* Arab peoples, since the Othering of Muslim women also comes hand-in-hand with the Othering of Muslim men. In this context, Ziauddin defies the "negative" associations of common tropes of the Arab male gender including degradation of females, misogyny, Islamic and political fervor, and strict rules, just as both Malala and Toor Pekai challenge the portrayal of the conventional Othered Muslim woman. Instead, as with Ziauddin, the Yousafzai females, who are at the opposite ends of the "spectrum" of Muslim women obedience, are both seen as activists and feminists in their own ways.

### *Generational Othering*

A close reading of Yousafzai's text implies that both Malala and her mother may have been Othered by the norms of the West and the East, but in radically different ways. Commentators on Yousafzai state that the reception "of Malala's book has been less celebratory in Pakistan than in the West" because with the publication of her autobiography, Malala had become "westernized," and was therefore regarded by both Pakistani and Middle Eastern state agencies and male critics as an infidel (Shazia). With an infidel defined as a non-believer or heretic, the dubbing of Malala as an infidel seems ironic since she repeatedly professes how much of a believer she is in Allah and the Qur'an: "I love my God. I thank my Allah. I talk to him all day. He is the greatest" (Yousafzai 313).

This misrepresentation of Malala's status of belief within her own society accompanies the perception that she is an outsider because she also "fails" to willingly adhere to Middle Eastern Islamic conventions such as purdah (living in separate rooms and physically separated by dividers from men in public and private spaces) or "appropriate" female activities (praying,

cooking, cleaning, marriage, child-raising). Although accepted by the West because of her activism, Malala is ironically Othered by the West, too, because she originates from a Middle Eastern country, is a devout Muslim, and, in the “veil debate,” chooses to wear traditional head-coverings. These characteristics go against typical feminist conceptions that one mustn’t cleave to *any* Arabic traditions when trying to “change customs.”

The accredited scholar Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian-American writer on Islam and Islamic feminism, references Qassim Amin’s work of the *Tahir Al-Mar’a* (The Liberation of Woman) to raise the notion that “general cultural and social transformations” in Muslim countries require both “symbolic reform – the abolition of the veil — [and] reforms” in general to “bring about the desired general social transformation” of women’s rights (Ahmed 145). This notion served as one of the foundational platforms for “feminism in Arab culture,” and thus sets up stipulations and requirements for Muslim women trying to break the mold of oppressive patriarchies, such as Malala.

Then, in the world’s eyes, Toor Pekai is foremost Othered by the West because she falls into “traditional” Muslim women generalizations – she’s a housewife, uneducated, devout in her faith, adherent towards governmental orders, swayed by the Taliban (at first), and ultimately stubborn towards change. Interestingly, though, Toor Pekai is also Othered by the East of Pakistan because of her unconventional and open relationship with her husband Ziauddin and her support of both her daughter’s and husband’s activism.

The dual Othering against Malala and Toor Pekai elucidates the complexity of the Othering debate – no one side is to blame and “freedom of expression” is limited by *both* major sides of the discussion (Yousafzai 25). Malala and her mother’s inability to escape Othering no matter which conventions (Eastern or Western) they adhere to serve as a commentary on the

main issue of the Othering Muslim women debate – the female gender is Othered *in general*, and the Islamic faith can be used as a scapegoat or justification *for* gender-based Othering. Although Muslim women such as Malala and her mother receive an added Othering for their religion and ethnicity, much of the discrimination and mistreatment they endure stems from a patriarchal sexism applicable to women of all races, faiths, and upbringings. There does not seem to be a resolution to this quandary within the current historiography, but at least acknowledging its existence and shedding light on such a deeply-embedded and inherent issue within humanity can help to combat the mistreatment in everyday realities.

### *Islamic Feminism*

Malala is a devout Muslim, a strong advocate for women's rights, and a firm believer in Allah and in the Muslim faith for feminism of all kinds. Launching off the previous definition in the Introduction, Islamic feminism is an independent and individual interpretation of the Quran and the rights of women within the Muslim faith. Margot Badran's work, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, delineates – even in title alone! – how interwoven and complex the nature of feminism in Islam truly is. Juxtaposed with secular feminism, Islamic feminism allows for both the religious and “‘the secular’ within the feminisms that Muslim women have created,” as well as indicates “how Muslim women as feminists employ multiple discourses and possess multiple identities” (Badran 5). Malala Yousafzai serves as a prime example of this multiplicity, as she does not fit the mold of purely one “feminist” identity and consistently strives to interpret aspects of her religion and Pakistani historical past in her own way. As Badran discusses, one of the main forms of Islamic feminism is for Muslim women to “pose their own questions about women and Islam and look to the Qur'an for answers” (Badran 9). Yousafzai, although young,



applies this kind of interpretation to the age-old sayings and teachings she'd been exposed to during the adolescent years of which are referenced within her autobiography. For example, Yousafzai often questions different Islamic/Pakistani traditions to her father:

Then [Malala] said, "there's a *tapa* I want to rewrite."  
 [Her] father looked intrigued. *Tapae* are the centuries-old collected wisdom of our society; you don't change them.  
 "Which one?" he asked. "This one," [she] said.

*If the men cannot win the battle, O my country,  
 Then the women will come forth and win you an honor.*

[Malala] wanted to change it to:

*Whether the men are winning or losing the battle, O my country,  
 The women are coming and the women will win you an honor.*  
 (Yousafzai 295-96)

Malala's questioning of a centuries-old saying and her poignant alterations of "If" to "Whether," "win" to "winning or losing," "then" to "the," and "will come" to "are coming" make for a *tapa* that's female-oriented, empowering to women, and form-fitting to both Islamic and secular feminisms. Interestingly, this feminist-based questioning occurs in the Western land of England – this setting paired with the "Eastern" Malala can demonstrate the connection between Western and Eastern feminisms, and how "secular and Islamic feminists now work side-by-side in productive synergy more than ever, in a highly volatile environment; one which is full of more peril and more promise" than ever before (Badran 12). In the Western world, Yousafzai is a representative of hope for both Eastern and Western females, as seen in her New York speech to the U.N., where when she was 16, she wrote "her speech [not] only with the U.N.

delegates in mind; [but also] for every person around the world who could make a difference” (Yousafzai 309).

Indeed, Yousafzai’s universal audience and cosmopolitan environment engages feminists of all platforms in the global *umma*, or community. One can glimpse through this dynamic the interworking facets of multiple feminisms, and how Islamic feminists such as Malala are “providing the new intellectual fuel necessary to push forward feminist goals in Muslim societies in Africa and Asia, and in Muslim communities in the West, in an effort to move closer to achieving a transformed *umma*” (Badran 11-12). Although Yousafzai tends to focus on education rather than religion in her public addresses, her intrinsic motivation that incorporates the Muslim faith follows within the lines of Islamic feminism in that “Islamic feminism rejects the notion of public-private dichotomy; it conceptualizes a holistic *umma* in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space” (Badran 324). Yousafzai constantly blends her “two” identities into a singular being –

Today I looked at myself in the mirror and thought for a second. Once I had asked God for one or two extra inches in height, but instead he made me as tall as the sky, so high that I could not measure myself... By giving me this height to reach people, [Allah] has also given me great responsibilities. (Yousafzai 313)

This physical and spiritual, literal and metaphorical combination of Malala’s height in stature, impact, and influence demonstrates the unique alloy that her work and presence brings to the entire discussion of Othering, in that she represents the “intersecting notions of gender equality and social justice and [an ability to] deconstruct patriarchy and disentangle it from Islam” – as supported by scholars such as Amina Wadud or Asma Barla (Badran 324). If Malala cannot “measure herself,” then neither can others or patriarchal forces; the implication is then that only Allah can assess the status and influence of any person because he “gives great

responsibilities.” The notion that equality transcends a single religion, system, or person helps in illustrating how “feminism has been neither an exclusively Western construct nor monolithic,” and that supporting equality is a universally important component of Malala’s influence (Badran 326).

### *The Subaltern*

In one sense, Malala may be seen as a victim to the objectification present in Spivak’s famous comment: “white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men.” In this statement, Spivak wanted the audience to notice “not only the white/brown dynamic, but also the man/woman dynamic. Even as the sentence guides us to see how the ‘white savior’ narrative strips power from the brown man, the woman in the sentence remains an object” (Beyond Critique 178).

This objectification can apply to Malala. Even though Malala has made countless speeches, blogs, reports, conferences, and features across the globe on her quest for female education, much Western coverage still characterizes her as a victim who needed to be rescued from the savage Taliban. Such a characterization is false—Malala is not “the agent-less, subaltern figure that the postcolonial critics seem to presume,” nor does she succumb to the “white savior” mentality (Beyond Critique 178). Malala refuses to “position the Taliban as Muslim savages... [and she even] implicates the West in the rise of the Taliban” (Beyond Critique 179). This statement demonstrates Malala’s resistance against becoming a subaltern yet again — the first time she was externally subalternized was when she had to silence her voice because of the Taliban; now, given the above context, Westerners might be seen as weakening the unique strength and bravery of her expression by implying that the Taliban are simply

savages and evil. Such a reduction detracts from Malala's true accomplishments within her own context for the sake of creating a narrative that Westerners can understand.

To build off of Spivak's argument, Lila Abu-Lughod contributes another way in which Western interpretations and intervention of the Taliban, Muslim women, and their traditions add a subalternity to the people they're trying to condemn, or "save." In her narrative, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Abu-Lughod addresses the "War on Terrorism" and whether anthropology can provide "critical purchase on the justifications made for American intervention in Afghanistan in terms of liberating, or saving, Afghan women" (Abu-Lughod 782). In addressing these issues, Abu-Lughod relies heavily on philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of *difference* — whether referring to burqas or social activist groups, Abu-Lughod believes that Westerners often fail to realize their misconstrued attitudes and notions regarding differences in cultures, and therefore ultimately fail to respect the differences of the Other.

One of Abu-Lughod's main examples of this Western Othering refers to Afghanistan, but the misappropriation that occurs harkens to Malala's experience. Shortly after the terrorist attack of September 2001, Laura Bush made a radio address on November 17, 2001 that served to further Spivak's statement that history repeats itself with "white men saving brown women from brown men." Bush "enlisted women to justify American bombing and intervention in Afghanistan" on the premise that Afghan women *needed* saving (Abu-Lughod 784). This blatant call for intervention in another culture demonstrated that even in modern times, Western-Europeans feel this colonial need to interfere in other countries in order to "better" their quality of life. Yousafzai experienced this intervening force when Western leaders attempted to impart their own beliefs and feelings unto her own — take the U.N., for instance; this assumption that

Yousafzai could not express herself *by herself* is a blatant example of the type of subalternity posited by Spivak.

Laura Bush had admirable intentions of rescuing Afghan women from the Taliban and other terrorists through her speech, but she still appropriated Western ideals to Afghanis' ways of life – “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Abu-Lughod 784). Seemingly positive in her goals, Bush's statement also serves as another justification for the United States' invasion of Afghanistan — she plays on sympathy and empathy to elicit a sense of pity for the Afghan women, therefore subalternating them by presenting Afghani women as weak and in need of rescue.

Not only may it be said that Western society consistently expresses how Middle Eastern women need saving, but it also often imposes an ideology upon a culture other than its own. For instance, large groups within Western society state that women should reject wearing the burqa as an act of defiance since the terrorist group, the Taliban, forces females to don the burqa for their religious purposes; the clothing has now become “the ultimate sign of oppression” (Abu 785). Although one could perceive this recommendation as a way for women to escape Taliban dictatorship, most Westerners do not realize that “good respectable women from strong families” have traditionally worn the burqa and such women often *enjoy* wearing the cloth covering while in the public eye (Abu 786). Take Toor Pekai, Malala's mother, for an example – Toor proudly and securely wears a face covering, and to be without it would be a form of discomfort and oppression. Anthropologically, people “wear the appropriate form of dress for their social

communities and are guided by socially shared standards, religious beliefs, and moral ideals” (Abu 785).

Muslim women are no exception—many Islamic women continue to cover their face because the clothing makes them feel safe and comfortable in public; not because the Taliban forces the clothing upon them. In *I am Malala*, Yousafzai often references how the women in the Swat Valley eagerly anticipate and participate in shopping in the outdoor markets for the newest patterned or in-style veil not because of the Taliban, but of their own volition. There are, of course, a plethora of exceptions to this (as in the case of Malala, who although veiled does not take the same pleasure in the veil as her mother, or also the women of EXMNA), and Abu-Lughod states that Westerners need to take care “not to reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing” (Abu 786).

Whether defending or condemning the burqa, Westerners place themselves in Islamic culture and deem their opinions relevant to how Muslim women should feel. Western society can subalternate Muslim women through this cultural intervention and the reductive interpretation of veiling, “Othering” this group of people just as their ancestors did. In many circumstances, Western society also remains apparently oblivious to its hypocrisy about subalternating Muslim women’s clothing choices, because even in Western culture are its members slaves to the tyrannical rule of the fashion industry. Just as Westerners interpret the traditional donning of the burqa as oppressive and old-fashioned, so, too, could other cultures judge the fashion trends of Western-European civilization as being outdated and unforgivingly cruel to those with body types that depart from *Elle* magazine covers or *Victoria’s Secret* catalogs.

*Life-Writing and Political Self-Representation*

When assessing both Yousafzai's and Nafisi's texts, authorial identity and self-representation needs to be kept foremost in mind as we situate these works in any context, especially that as encoded as Othering and subalternization. As Edward Said wrote in another of his works, *Reflections on Exile*, a novel focused on his own conflicting Palestinian identity, "What has been left behind may either be mourned, or it can be used to provide a different set of lenses" (Moore-Gilbert 119). The multi-faceted way Said addresses individuality and multi-identities through tales of his adolescence reflects unto Malala's own life story and her conduit of choice of the autobiography to describe her journey. In that sense, autobiography in both of our thesis subjects' cases becomes a space that allows for personal interpretation of what constitutes the Self, and sometimes that 'categorization' can lead to the identification of a personal Other.

Said found this dual identity in the form of his given name, with "Edward" representing a Western European identity, and his family name of "Said" signifying his Arab and Palestinian roots. Scholar Bryan Turner suggests that "'Said' is 'Edward's' Other," and Moore-Gilbert describes that "this 'underground Self', first encoded ethnically as an 'Arab identity' (OP: 90), is slowly re-conceptualized as a specifically Palestinian one" (Moore-Gilbert 117-118). Said elucidates the internal struggle of personal and political identity through numerous literary works, such as his memoir *Out of Place*, and the aforementioned *Reflections on Exile* – works which add his voice to the genre and discourse of life-writing and self-representation. Through the utilization of such self-representational forms of literature, Said (and Moore-Gilbert) propose that Said's conception of subjectivity regarding identity has the potential to enlarge "the possibility of solidarity by affirming hybridity and multiplicity" within a self-narrative and self-identification (Moore-Gilbert 120).

*Out of Place*, to an extent, “is consonant with the many postcolonial writings, fictional as well as non-fictional, which plot the formation of the individual protagonist in allegorical relation to the emergence of collective national aspirations to an independent identity” (Moore-Gilbert 118). Yousafzai’s non-fictional, post-colonial work adheres to this “timeline” and discovery almost precisely. The reader follows Malala’s adolescence and naïveté about the political sphere in the Swat Valley – “Let’s pretend it’s a Twilight movie and that we’re vampires in the forest” – to her entrance and involvement into the political climate of not only Pakistan, but also the global stage – “On 12 July I turned fourteen, which in Islam means you are an adult. With my birthday came the news that Taliban had killed the owner of the Swat Continental Hotel, who was on a peace committee” (Yousafzai 227, 231). Even the placement of these two emblematic passages within mere pages of each other demonstrates the quickness of Yousafzai’s personal timeline of development and the speed at which our “protagonist” had to “grow up” into the “collective national aspirations” of her community.

Yousafzai’s life-writing can also be read to perhaps illustrate her own Self vs. Other identity – “When people talk about the way I was shot and what happened, I think it’s the story of Malala, “a girl shot by the Taliban”; I don’t feel it’s a story about me at all” (Yousafzai 301). This disconnect – “I don’t feel it’s a story about me at all” – of the internal Malala and her mediatized, globalized self is a form of Othering not often discussed or recognized – the displacement of one’s own self by external expectations and/or realities can subalternize just as much as purely external forces can. The intrinsic Othering journey within oneself is an important facet to consider in the Othering of Muslim women debate, as it offers a new perspective to the conversation.



### *Critical Viewpoints and Limitations*

One of Malala's limitations as a Muslim female perspective is her age – although her young outlook on Pakistan and global relations offers refreshing and new components to the Othering conversation, her lack of experience (and some would say knowledge) also limits her reliability. Malala serves as one particular instance of Othering and subalternity from the lens of a girl who was brought up in a more “liberal” and lenient Pakistani household. Her upbringing also provides a bias, as one could argue that Yousafzai had a more “privileged” existence as opposed to other Muslim women in Pakistan, the Middle East, or across the globe. With these caveats in mind, Malala's tale can then be read with a critical eye and her Othered experience as one instance of many that nevertheless gives a credible (albeit disproportionate) voice to thither females who do not have her platform.

### *Malala Since Publication*

In the past five years since Yousafzai's publication and worldwide promotion, there have been significant advancements in the dismantling of gender-based Othering, but Muslim women still face the brunt of global discrimination. This perspective, though, has not set back Yousafzai from continuing to make her voice heard in the Muslim women's rights debate. By 2017, the then-20 years' old Malala Yousafzai has accomplished a great deal since her rise to fame in 2013. In four short years, Yousafzai wrote an autobiography, co-founded the initiative of The Malala Fund with her father (an organization that works to promote female secondary education), attended Oxford University in England, became one of the youngest Nobel Laureates, and traveled across the globe in her mission to advocate for girls' right to education. As General Ban Ki-Moon described her, Malala is “a symbol of hope, a daughter of the United

Nations” for the entire world (U.N. News). But with this admirable role also comes many misrepresentations and appropriations on the issues crucial to Yousafzai’s narrative: the Islamic religion, the female gender, and a national identity that goes hand-in-hand with individual and global Othering.

In fact, this label -- “... A daughter of the United Nations” -- by General Ban Ki-Moon already denotes misrepresentation of the East by the West (a common societal trope) through its automatic association of a good and just deed being equivocated to Western powers. By aligning Yousafzai’s actions with the Western-based alliance of the United Nations, the U.N. General’s statement acts as a perfect representation of the West – with good intentions – appropriating the East as their own. Ironically, General Ban Ki-Moon is Korean, an ‘Eastern’ ethnicity that serves to show how ingrained Western mentalities are in *all* global citizens, ‘Western’ by origin or not. Yousafzai also tells Ban Ki-Moon her desire to be a leader, and instead of drawing upon her leading in Pakistan or other Eastern countries, General Ban Ki-Moon describes Yousafzai’s leadership role including “Pro-West” tendencies.

Yousafzai’s “world has changed so much,” but one could argue that in a lot of ways, the appropriation she experienced by the Taliban merely transferred to appropriation by new agents (Yousafzai 309). For example, the last line in Yousafzai’s autobiography is: “I am Malala. My world has changed but I have not” (313). The placement of Yousafzai’s first statement of how the “world has changed” before her stance that “she has not” implies that, first and foremost, the *world* is the focus of the global community rather than individual experiences. Although the universal is critical to fixing global issues, worldwide change has to start at the individual level. In her sentence placement, Yousafzai implies that she sees the global implications of education and gender equality as the priority, with her life being secondary as a tool in the implementation.

Just as the equality of human rights is a complicated issue, the belief is furthered by Yousafzai's declaration that she does not "want to be thought of as the 'girl who was shot by the Taliban' but the 'girl who fought for education'" (Yousafzai 309). Although classified as a daughter of the West, Yousafzai self-identifies as "a proud daughter of Pakistan;" her decision to "not be like that" in regard to customary Islamic and Pakistani traditions demonstrates her agency in self-characterization. This agency, though, is undermined by the East *and* the West as demonstrated by the unintentional appropriation of Ban Ki-Moon (Yousafzai 25-26).

The misappropriation of Yousafzai in the West occurs in both blatant and subtle ways. From journalists who make assumptions that Yousafzai wants to remain in the U.K. when in reality she knows (and desires) that she "will go back to Pakistan," to the focus of the West on Yousafzai's title of "the girl who was shot by the Taliban" rather than Yousafzai's self-declared title as the "girl who stood up for education," Western powers often mediatize and use Yousafzai as a propaganda image just as much as a humanitarian role model (Yousafzai 311, cover)

Another instance of disconnect between Western thought and Yousafzai occurred while Malala was in the British hospital to receive surgery for her face:

The United Nations announced they were designating 10 November, one month and a day after the shooting, Malala Day. I didn't pay much attention, as I was preparing for a big operation the following day to repair my facial nerve... The hospital had been giving regular updates to journalists about how I was doing but I did not tell them about this to keep it private. (Yousafzai 293-294)

The fact that the U.N. created a global day of recognition and appreciation for Malala not on the correct day of her shooting and that Yousafzai "didn't pay much attention" to the designation can serve as an instance of inappropriately applied Western influence. Yousafzai didn't desire a day in her honor nor did it bear much weight on her current situation, but the

entity of the U.N. did what it *thought* would be most meaningful to Malala and her supporters.

Well-intended, the gesture is a symbol of Western interaction with Malala, Western appropriation and intervention of what it deems important, and the disconnect between Western powers (journalists) and the true feelings of their subjects (Yousafzai and her “private” affairs).

## Chapter 2

### Iran and Azar Nafisi



#### Iran: Background, Politics, and Gender

“Revolutions invariably produce stronger states” – well, at least according to Alexander de Tocqueville in Ervand Abraham’s book, *A History of Modern Iran* (Abrahamian 155). This opening quote in Abrahamian’s “The Islamic Republic” chapter is as complicated and complex a statement as Iran’s political history, and as Azar Nafisi’s interaction with, and perspective on, her Eastern homeland.

As a context for Nafisi’s autobiography, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 looms front and center. The revolution set the stage for a new Islamic constitution, democratic principles, and a fully-fledged Iranian theocracy – developments that both weakened and strengthened the state in terms of democratic, social, religious, economic, and political ideals.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, as illustrated in the blend of Eastern and Western influence that impacted Azar Nafisi’s life path, the reach of Western influence extended well into Iran’s operations, even before the Revolution. In 1977, the Shah was “anxious to cast off the label [of Iran being] ‘one of

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, the state consolidated its power in 1980-1989, but also “expand[ed] the bureaucracy” – an outcome whose prevention started the Iranian Revolution in the first place (Abrahamian 169). This expansion occurred on the account of the “steady in-flows of oil revenues [that] brought an average of \$15 billion a year throughout the 1980s and as much as \$30 billion a year in the early 2000s” (Abrahamian 169). As Western nations make up much of the global oil demand, the double influence of Westerners contributing to Iran’s boosted economy and exports while also adding to the expanded bureaucracy that goes so against democratic and capitalistic principles is extremely ironic. Just as the Iranian “state is no longer a separate entity unto itself hovering over society, but a large entity deeply enmeshed in society,” so, too, is Western influence deeply embedded in Iranian culture, economy, and society (Abrahamian 7).

the worst violators of human rights in the world,” and this desire permeated into the new Islamic Constitution of the 1980s (Abrahamian 7). In this “hybrid” government of Eastern and Western principles, theocracy and democracy, patriarchy and autonomy, human rights became more “westernized” in numerous ways.

In regard to gender relations, the new constitution included women in the general electorate, a motion that gained the female sex a more pronounced political presence than during the Shah’s reign. Despite this improvement, though, Iranian society and the government still “presumed the president would be male” – an inherent and common-held belief that furthered the nation’s patriarchal structure that would define Nafisi and many others’ existence (Abrahamian 166). The constitution also promised to reduce “inequality between men and women” amongst a plethora of other “progressive” assurances, but the inclusion of “Catch 22’s” within the governing documents counteracted such developments. Even though multiple Republics and constitutions would follow those of 1977, this open yet restrictive world order would set the stage for the locale of Azar Nafisi and her students during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Nafisi and her female students underwent much of the back-and-forth legislation that would define Iran in the late twentieth century, and their interactions with this national climate heavily shaped their opinions and perspectives on religion, politics, and Iranian culture as a whole.

The climate in which Nafisi wrote was one where an implicit authoritarian power of the state became explicit, especially after post-Revolutionary forces began to remodel society during and after the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988; that historical moment brought both Western involvement and changes to Iranian government, and the Third Islamic Revolution undid much of the “progressive” changes of the past regimes. For instance:

The New Regime undid the Family Protection Law, lowering the marriage age for girls back to thirteen and allowing husbands to divorce wives without court permission. It purged both women from the judiciary and secular teachers from the educational system... It enforced on all a strict ‘Islamic code of public appearance’ where men were discouraged from wearing ties [and] women were obliged to wear either scarves and long coats or preferably the full chadour... The regime censored newspapers, books, movies and... rewrote textbooks. (Abrahamian 177)

The restriction of women within this stricter theocracy occurred in the middle of Azar Nafisi’s professional teaching career, and, in fact, she was expelled from the University of Tehran in 1981 for not adhering to one of the new laws – wearing the veil. Nafisi describes these laws from the “on-the-ground” perspective – “Disobedience to the [laws] were punished by fines, up to seventy-six lashes and jail terms... The government created the notorious morality squads: four armed men and women in white Toyota patrols, monitoring the streets, ensuring the enforcement of the laws” (Nafisi 167). With repercussions as harsh as these and the constant presence of “big brother” in day-to-day existence, Nafisi “wallowed in the afterglow of [her] irrelevance” as a means of coping with the political climate (Nafisi 171).

In her work, Nafisi openly rejected “Islam as a political entity,” a position that stemmed from her grandmother, a devout Muslim whose “veil, which to her was a symbol of her sacred relationship to God, now becom[ing] an instrument of power, turning the women who wore them into political signs and symbols” (Nafisi 103). Nafisi’s generalization of how all veils transform the women who wear them into agents of political significance illustrates her perspective on the role of Islam in society, and her experiences during this raucous and repressive time provides the context for Nafisi’s negative outlook on Islam that’s present throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Even though Nafisi eventually returned to teach in Tehran, the following decade was rife with conflict, and her opinions followed suit – for Nafisi, the chador was “forever marred by the political significance it gained” and “had become cold and menacing” (Nafisi 192). This

perspective could be applied to Iran as a whole in Nafisi's mind, especially when the political and social situation worsened in the latter half of the twentieth century.

During the late 1980s, the Islamic Republic "unleashed a reign of terror" over its citizens and neighboring nations. Ayatollah Khomeini responded to human rights organizations' complaints of his mass executions after the Revolution with:

Criminals should not be tried. The trial of a criminal is against human rights. Human rights demand that we should have killed them in the first place when it became known that they were criminals... They criticize us because we are executing the brutes. (Nafisi 96)

Such perspective gives insight into Iran's leadership, and the conflicting internal and external opinions on what constitutes human rights within a nation. As discussed earlier in regard to instances in Pakistan, Nafisi's work also gives a real-time insight into the modern Western and Eastern value-clash, and adds to the debate of how far global powers should interfere in a nation's internal decisions. Human rights violations are universally acknowledged as intolerable, but the enforcement of such global morals often gets fuzzy. As far as Nafisi's Iran is concerned, this conquest and reactionary decimation only ended in 1988 when Khomeini "accept[ed] an U.N.-mediated ceasefire. He announced that he had no choice but to 'drink the poisoned chalice'" of cooperation with the Western world (Abrahamian 181). This unwanted "surrender" to the complicated entity of the U.N., and Khomeini's reference to the global group as a "poisoned chalice," harkens to the Eastern feeling of Otheredness often felt by national leaders, as mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis. "Poison" juxtaposed with a royal and glamorous "chalice" is reminiscent of the dual consequences that come from interactions with the West (gives with one hand, takes with another), and although Khomeini accepted some U.N.-instigated terms, he still continually strove to ally his disciples and followers against the West up until his



death in 1989. Khomeini serves as an illustration of a leader who's disenchanted with the West but allies with them out of necessity and fear, a position that can be likened to many Eastern figures today.

But, interestingly, during the 1990s when Nafisi created her secret book club (1995) and moved from Iran to the United States (1997), Iran saw a heavy switch in its governance and state policies that more mimicked Western democratic ideals. After Khomeini's death, the new leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, opened up and improved Iran's foreign relations and international politics, measures which in turn caused significantly improved outcomes for the nation state. For instance:

Britain reestablish[ed] full diplomatic relations [with Iran] which had been broken since 1979... The U.N. itself dropped Iran from its list of human rights violators... and [the State allowed] women to study abroad on state scholarships; colleagues to wear headscarf instead of the full chador; and schoolgirls to wear colourful clothes. They even passed bills directly contradicting traditional interpretations of the shari'a. They eliminated all distinctions between men and women, between Muslims and non-Muslims. (Abrahamian 189-190)

Such a switch revolutionized Iran on the global stage, and also improved women's rights tenfold since the decade encompassing Nafisi's dominant experiences with Islam. Nafisi acknowledges, though, that after the Iran-Iraq War, there was "a sign of hope, if an ironic one," in that Iranian leaders were "being transformed by the very ideas and systems they had once set up to destroy" them i.e. Western influences (Nafisi 277). Even these "improvements" were downplayed by Nafisi, as she states that the "regime had so penetrated [their] hearts and minds, insinuating itself into [their] homes, spying on [them] in their bedrooms, that it had come to shape [them] against [their] own will" (Nafisi 280).

The leadership of Khamenei was by no means perfect, but throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi fails to acknowledge any success of Iran's leadership as a true victory; rather, she views "commendable" actions as just temporary distractions from a system of abuse and mistreatment. Nafisi's perspective holds merit in many ways, but her complex and ultimately negative view of the Iranian regime is also paralleled in Iran's take on the West -- "the ruling elite's inferiority complex" led to the "burning [of] the American flag on the one hand and being obsequious to Westerners, especially American journalists, on the other" (Nafisi 280). The new laws and policies enacted by Khamenei were efforts at global "peace," but even these controversial attempts to bridge the gap of the West and the East came to an abrupt halt with September 11, 2001.

After the terrorist attack, the Iranian reform movement felt backlash from both conservatives within the nation as well as the United States. President Bush's "axis of evil" speech in January 2002 named "Iran as a major threat to world peace, accused it of aspiring to build nuclear weapons and of financing international terrorism directed at the United States" (Abrahamian 192). This accusation was unexpected (as Iran and the United States had been working closely together to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan and create a new government in Kabul), and according to Khamenei, this speech "plung[ed] Iran into an extended crisis that has played into the hands of... conservative opponents and frozen hopes of domestic reform" (Abrahamian 192).

Nafisi describes, though, that after this global isolation and condemnation of Iran, change and progress still found root within the Middle Eastern nation. In her "Epilogue" of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi writes from the perspective of her 2003 self, and her closing chapter

offers interesting touchstones and launch-points into the discussion of the modern, Iranian, Muslim, post-9/11 woman today:

I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me. Much has changed in appearance since Bijan and I left. There is more defiance in Manna's gait and those of other women; their scarves are more colorful and their robes much shorter; they wear makeup now and walk freely with men who are not their brothers, fathers or husbands. Parallel to this, the raids and arrests and public executions also persist. But there is a stronger demand for freedom... this dogged desire for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness by young Iranians today [will] determine the shape of our future. (Nafisi 341)

Although progress glimmers throughout the nation, Iran still faces numerous internal difficulties. In the January 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> edition of the U.K.-based *The Economist*, the political turmoil and theme of protest that characterized Nafisi's youth is described in the current, 2018 setting of Iran:

Protestors took to the streets in more than 70 towns and cities in Iran, some complaining about the economy, others wishing death on the president, Hassan Rouhani, and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The clerical regime organized counter-demonstrations that attracted tens of thousands. At least 20 people have been killed, and many more arrested. (Economist 6)

The dissatisfaction of Iranians with their leadership and the climate of the Middle Eastern country bears much weight in the Othering discussion, as the subalternity of groups of people can occur both on the global stage and within a singular nation. As there is no universal way to describe Iran as a whole, progress and freedom finds merit within the tumultuous landscape of the nation-state just as does Azar Nafisi's criticism of Islam and Iranian society.

## **Azar Nafisi and Interpreting *Reading Lolita in Tehran***

### *Feminism and Islamic Feminism*

When assessed as a literary work representative of both feminism, and, specifically Islamic feminism, critical reception to Nafisi is wide-ranging. On the one hand, she has been accused of being an “Islamaphobe;” her novel composed of “inadvertent mildness and smug satisfaction;” in short, the woman and her work have both been universally received as incredibly controversial (Lewis-Kraus). It’s not difficult to see why, though, as Nafisi demonstrates both perspectives of the “Othering Muslim women” dialogue – she defends female rights (feminism), but also states Islamic feminism to be a nonexistent entity. For instance:

The myth of Islamic feminism—a contradictory notion, attempting to reconcile the concept of women’s rights with the tenets of Islam—took root. It enabled rulers to have their cake and eat it too: they could claim to be progressive and Islamic, while modern women were denounced as Westernized, decadent and disloyal. They needed us modern men and women to show them the way, but they also had to keep us in their place. (Nafisi 262)

Azar’s outlook on Islamic feminism being “a myth” correlates to her perspective on Islam – both have become irrevocably politicized. Even though she steadfastly supports females and Muslim women – her dearly loved grandmother was herself a devout Muslim, as were all the female students in her book club – Nafisi has been accused of being incapable of fully viewing females as “modern women” with full rights and freedoms if they don’t adhere to more “Western” principles and Islam-critical ways of thinking. Even though “Westernness” can be used against Muslim women (as in the case of Malala), this “decadent and disloyal” association seems critically important to female empowerment in Nafisi’s perspective, as well as her own personal life trajectory.

On the other hand, when viewed as a strong proponent of secular feminism, Nafisi's book as a whole could be said to adhere to Margot Badran's belief that "feminism has been neither an exclusively Western construct nor monolithic" (Badran 326). Nafisi diverges in similarity to Badran, though, with her belief that the politicization of Islamic feminism (even in title) has since ironically separated Islam from feminism itself. Nafisi states that "the first step toward liberation is to refuse to dance with your jailor and to find your own unique way of expression," and often times (because of the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and the governing forces of Iran), that "jailer" is the Quran itself (Nafisi 262).

Although in disagreement with the term and notion of Islamic feminism, Nafisi's collection of memoirs still offers an interesting perspective on secular feminism within Muslim women communities. She states that "they were never victims; Iranian women have never acted as victims," and that "if Iranian women were not that powerful, why would the government have to spend so much energy and so much power and so much force to change them? They are dangerous because they are powerful, and so therein lies the hope" (Nafisi 372-373). This pro-feminism, pro-equality stance lessens the subalternity of women, and also simultaneously includes the Iranian government as ironically supporting female empowerment through their restrictions and maltreatment. Such a simultaneous subalternization and de-subalternization illustrates the complexity and sometimes paradoxical nature of the Othering of Muslim women, and Nafisi's interaction with such a complicated relationship offers one viewpoint of the Muslim women *umma* as viewed through feminist lenses.

Many of the women examined by the Iranian government are Muslims in Nafisi's memoir (as well as in contemporary society), and the inclusion of Muslim females in feministic movements can reveal how many different interpretations of Islamic feminism exist in the world

today. Are Islamic feminists any Muslim that participates in female-empowerment actions and beliefs? Or are they just as Badran describes them in that they must interpret the Quran and other Islamic holy works in their own ways? Being an Islamic feminist is not as cut-and-dry as both Nafisi and Badran make it, and the inclusion of such ideology within feminist movements is complex and powerful and helps illuminate just how much particular interpretations can vary from universal generalizations.

As much as Nafisi distinguishes Islamic feminism from modernity, she still supports women's rights and offers insightful commentary on the plight of Iranian women for equality:

And at the forefront of these struggles you see the women. I mean, Iranian women have been amazing in trying to receive the rights they had, and also in linking not just to the world outside but in bringing to our attention the fact that they have a history of their own. (Nafisi 372)

Nafisi's acknowledgement of Iranian women's agency may run the risk of lumping Iranian women together as one entity, but it also gives them individual agency in fighting for particular and universal rights. This particular and universal fight for Iranian women's "history of their own" demonstrates how feminism can be a dual identity that doesn't necessarily fit neatly into either narrowly defined secular *or* Islamic feminism. Her work also demonstrates that empowerment can come from just "bringing to attention" the issues faced by a population or group of individuals, and Iranian women do just that – by bringing to light dilemmas, treatments and plights that had previously been kept "under the rug." While such realities may also exist in nearly all countries of the world, this group demonstrates through their actions that it doesn't particularly matter whether secular or Islamic feminism in name, the main point of the quest of *any* feminism should be equality for all.

*Whose Islam?*

Nafisi posits this question – “Whose Islam?” – in regard to the politicization and marginalization applied by the Western world to the idea of Iran and “whose Islam” is prioritized within the nation. This question also encompasses how Muslim women are Othered outside of and within the Islamic faith, and “whose Islam” is the one globally and regionally discussed between the male and female gender. The generalizing nature of the Western world when talking about “the Muslim world” is an inaccurate and impersonal way of providing an answer to the “whose Islam” question, as well as an instance of viewing an entire group of people, including Nafisi and Malala, as all the same. But, as in the instance of the two female foci of this thesis, Muslim practices and definition of Islam differ from sect to sect, and person to person; varied national and personal ways of practicing Islam makes answering the question of “whose Islam” impossible unless looking at individual experience. Nafisi even posits the question on a national scale in regard to Iran:

There was a “myth” of Iran... and it was a very politicized and distorted mythology. It has little to do with the Iran that [Nafisi] knows, or its history. And Iran has existed for at least 2500 years. Half of the history was not even Muslim, it was Zoroastrianism. And even when we talk about Islam, what Islam are we talking about? Whose Islam? (Nafisi 363)

Beyond the book, Othering exists within the Muslim faith as believers themselves differ in response to the “whose Islam” question. For instance, students in Nafisi’s book club stem from a range of different sects of the Muslim faith, and their experiences of being targeting and sometimes killed from others who call themselves Muslim are akin to Nafisi’s own interactions with Islam, even though one experience is devout and the other is not. The nomenclature of Muslim sects is not exactly the same (as seen in the characters of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* who

come from varied Muslim backgrounds), and these differences *within* a particular faith still don't stop Othering from occurring. For instance, even the characters within Nafisi's work who are practicing Orthodox Muslims – a sect globally regarded as the most radical and intense of Muslim denominations and “should,” in theory, be supportive of *any* Muslim believer – behave differently than the politically racialized Westerner would expect.

Contrary to Western public opinion, being a “good Muslim” is not enough to save someone from being a target of Islamic discrimination. Nafisi's student, Razieh, “was a believer, an Orthodox Muslim girl who never took her veil off, [and] was murdered by a regime that calls itself Islamic;” on that same token, Mr. Bahri, “who belonged to the Muslim Student Association, defended [Nafisi] and tried to keep [her] at the university while [her] own secular colleagues were trying to expel [her]” (Nafisi 363). These particular instances are just the tip of the iceberg of the “exceptions” to the global negative perception that all followers of Islam are a united front, and Nafisi and her Iranian students and colleagues serve as an illustration of a conundrum to the “Muslims as terrorists” dialogue frequently common in the West. Nafisi asks us to think about “Why [is she] less Muslim than the women who are married to the rulers in Iran, or who hold office? [Her] family was there for six hundred years, they served Iran the way theirs did,” and such a statement – regardless of one's personal opinion on Nafisi as a representative or not for Muslim women – forces one to stop and consider which definition of Islam the Othering debate (and Orientalism) centers itself around (Nafisi 363).

Is the answer to “whose Islam” one of post-9/11 fear and animosity? Is it one of military agency like during the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE? Is it one of youth as demonstrated by Nafisi's students or Malala Yousafzai? Defining which and whose Islam is central to the Othering conversation, and the impossibility of accurately responding to such a



question demonstrates how Islam is often used as a blanket reference to encompass swaths of different believers and groups of people. Nafisi's work attempts to present a clear-cut answer to these questions, but even though it certainly accounts for a variety of Islam versions, she by no mean offers a complete solution to this defining question.

### *Life-writing*

Nafisi's role in the post-colonial, life-writing genre is akin to an ironically less-empowered writer, Mary Seacole, in that both female writers insist on the ability to "tell the story of [their] lives in *their own way*" (Moore-Gilbert 129). Seacole was a Jamaican travel writer in the post-colonial genre who didn't acquire emancipation in her home nation until she was well into her thirties, but still chose to "manipulate the conventions of auto-biography and travel writing both in concert with and against each other" (Moore-Gilbert 84). Such volition and independence from both women is extremely important in this style of writing, as it can "connect [one] to strangers" and give insight into a particular frame of mind (Nafisi 369). Nafisi's memoir "seizes the initiative to tell her own story" rather than have someone else tell it (just as with Yousafzai's autobiography), and this action alones serves as a physical aid in the movement for female empowerment and the fight against Muslim women's presumed lack of autonomy.

Nafisi also plays a significant role à la Moore-Gilbert's claim that post-colonial writing "may prove equally useful in teaching the West a more credible and creditable conception of its place in the contemporary world" (Moore-Gilbert 130). Nafisi's collection of memoirs may be rife with controversial perspectives and opinions, but her work helps in the universal quest of promoting "self-reflection, self-criticism, and ambiguity" on difficult and prevalent topics such as the Othering of Muslim women by Western and Eastern societies; her life-writing can then be

“very dangerous to the black-and-white mindset, [the] kind of politicized and simplistic attitude that is so prevalent today, and not just in political circles” (Nafisi 358). No matter the stance taken in and outside of Nafisi’s memoir, the result is that the reader questions these global issues, reflects on their own opinions and life-experiences regarding the issues raised, and (hopefully) understands that no one perspective can solve major issues within the historical and contemporary world – all the ultimate goals and merit of the life-writing genre.

Nafisi definitely served as a conscious agent within her narrative, a quality that Moore-Gilbert also finds essential for post-colonial life-writing. Nafisi likens herself to Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights* because “she changed the King through telling the story, and that was the whole idea of [Nafisi’s] book” (Nafisi 358). Although a bit ironic in that Scheherazade was fighting to survive a misogynistic and sadistic caliph bent on killing every woman in the palace because of an original affront, Nafisi’s literary comparison demonstrates her intention of improving the dialogue around Muslim women, and acts as a counterpoint to Malala Yousafzai’s in that both women strove to enter into the arena of the Othered Muslim women conversation and contribute their perspectives all in the name of progress. In addition, Nafisi’s likening of herself to Scheherazade also calls to mind Scheherazade’s sister, who hides under the bed every night and offers “suggestions” to the caliph to help Scheherazade survive – actions that may be extrapolated into the “sisterhood” of Islamic women to whom Nafisi may be appealing.

### *Critical Viewpoints and Limitations*

Just as with the discussion of the general state of Muslim women, Nafisi and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has received both negative and complimentary views since its 2003 publication. A best-selling novel paired with an academic perspective would, in theory, lend itself to high credibility,

but numerous critics across the board fault the work for playing too much into Nafisi's personal biases and life experiences. *Slate* magazine published a poignantly titled article in 2006, "Pawn of the Neocons? The debate over Reading Lolita in Tehran," that described some of the majorly held issues towards Nafisi and her novel:

Though Nafisi tries to empathize (empathy, she reminds us, is the engine of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel) with the awful trials of her students and friends, she seems to lack the emotional capacity to rise above her own experience of life in the Islamic republic as a great inconvenience. (Lewis-Kraus)

The proposal of Nafisi's ironic lack of empathy and her "closed-mindedness" to the complex feelings of Muslim women in Iran holds merit in that Nafisi's narrative demonstrates how one perspective has the potential to cloud universal experiences, as well as generalize and subalternize even with good intentions. Just as the discourse of the Othering of Muslim women cannot be limited to just one woman or one viewpoint, Nafisi's life experiences cannot serve as emblematic or prophetic of *all* Iranian women's interaction with Islam.

Nafisi also identifies two major limitations herself within her narrative: her generation "was actually the generation that took too many things for granted" and that she can be "too much of an academic: "[she has] written too many papers and articles to be able to turn [her] experiences and ideas into narratives without pontificating. Although that is in fact [her] urge – to narrate, to reinvent [her]self along with all those others" (Nafisi 371, 266). These and the other aforementioned limitations demonstrate that Nafisi is not the "end-all, be-all" in analyzing Iranian and Muslim women, and that her perspective is, in fact, riddled with as many holes as any other expert in the field. But her perspective – no matter its reception – undoubtedly contributes to the Othering of Muslim women dialogue, and offers a way for every reader to engage with, and be informed, by various components of the global conversation.

*Nafisi Since Publication*

Since 2003, Nafisi settled in the United States and found contentment even amidst tumultuous political climates. In fact, in a 2008 Random House Reader's Circle Q&A, she stated:

I feel very at home in America. America has been generous to me and, although this might sound like a cliché, I believe this generosity is possible because America is still unique, because it is still a country of immigrants... I feel good over here as well. But I haven't left Iran; I never did. (Nafisi 370-371)

This conversation with Nafisi serves as a poignant contribution to glimpsing the contemporary and day-to-day existences of Muslim women in the Western world of the United States. Nafisi "feeling good" in a nation that has historically and contemporarily been one of the major perpetrators of Islamic-Othering shows a side of Western culture akin to the liberating experiences of the Ex-Muslims of North America organization. The United States (and the West) possesses the potential to be both safe-haven and jail, and the status of the climate depends on the individual's life-experience.

In a 2003 phone interview between an *Atlantic* reporter and Nafisi after *Reading Lolita in Tehran's* publication, Nafisi explained how:

One thing that [she has] been insisting since [she] came to [the U.S.], and it's hard to get it across to people, is that what is being touted as Islam by the Islamic state is not genuinely religion; it is religion being used as an ideology. Basically, fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon. In the same way that Hitler evoked a mythological religion of German purity and the glory of the past, the Islamists use religion to evoke emotions and passions in people who have been oppressed for a long time in order to reach their purpose. (Wasserman)

This excerpt not only sheds light on Nafisi's beliefs of the role of Islam in the modern world, but the conversation also demonstrates how upon arriving in the U.S. (even after attending Oklahoma University for her collegiate years), Nafisi had difficulty conveying the

dynamics of her home nation and Muslims to U.S. citizens. The fact that “it’s hard to get across to people” in the United States the nuances that are so widely discussed across the globe about Iran and the Islamic Republic demonstrates the extrinsic disconnect that exists for Nafisi from the citizens around her in both the Western and Eastern world. This viewpoint juxtaposed with Nafisi’s intrinsic sense of belonging in the U.S. in her other interview thus illustrates how her own levels of connection with the people around her can differ from the observed ones, and that beginning in 2003, Nafisi’s “integration” in the U.S. began with some obstacles.

Nafisi’s comfortability in the United States serves as an instance of Western “betterment,” but should not represent the universal Muslim woman (or immigrant) experience. In fact, the United States’ current political climate is one that arguably violates many freedoms Nafisi holds important, especially the “issue of choice” and that every woman should “have the right to choose whether she wants to wear [the veil] or not” (Nafisi 367). Although Nafisi references these rights in regard to what Iran should be doing, her insinuations can also be applied to the United States. With the recent “Muslim-travel bans” and continuous veil-debate that also occurs in European nations, the Western world is also culpable of diminishing female’s rights to be “completely free” (Nafisi 367).

Despite this tumultuous climate, Nafisi has accomplished quite a bit since 2003. In January 2009, Azar Nafisi published a memoir about her mother -- *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories* – and she’s currently working on a book titled *The Republic of the Imagination*, which is “about the power of literature to liberate minds and peoples” (Nafisi). Nafisi’s continuation within the life-writing genre paired with a separate commentary on literature is interesting to consider juxtaposed with *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, as the compartmentalization of two of Nafisi’s topics in her 2003 work (family and literature) as

separate books is an interesting post-moving-to-the-U.S. choice. Based on the content and topics of her new books, the life she led in Iran is still very much a part of her identity (even a couple decades later), and the focus on revealing “things [she] has been silent about” is extremely poignant in today’s #metoo and #timesup movements.

Her ongoing role in contributing to the Othering of Muslim women and Middle East debates puts Nafisi as consistent a figure as Malala Yousafzai on the global stage, and her influence since *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has only increased. Besides winning numerous awards and running workshops with women in Iran over the last 15 years, Nafisi also lives in the political hotspot of Washington, DC – a significant and powerful location for a female, feminist writer and professor – and is a Visiting Professor and the Executive Director of Cultural Conversations at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies (Nafisi). The classes she teaches range from aesthetics, to culture, literature, and the relation between culture and politics, all of which are extremely relevant and critical topics to both her own published works and the current discussions across the globe today.

Controversial or not, Nafisi is undoubtedly a significant figure in the Othering of Muslim women debate, and her involvement in the female-rights and empowerment movements of today serve to demonstrate her continual advocacy of equality and women rights.

## Chapter 3

### Commentaries and Disruptions



#### Universals and Particulars

As previously emphasized, the experience of the individual cannot be taken as emblematic of the universal, as “there are always particulars that confound our easy attempts to generalize or find quick fixes” (Abu-Lughod 193). The two ideologies of the “universal” and the “particular” are presented and defined by Lila Abu-Lughod in the following manner:

What is universal should or does apply or exist uniformly in a geographic sense. It is not something local. What is universal seems neutral in that it belongs to everyone and anyone, not to someone particular. The opposite would be something partisan that stems from that favors one group or grows out of its interests or traditions... The universal [is also] the more abstract term because universals stand about particulars, and therefore lend tremendous victory over those who claim them. (Abu-Lughod 86)

In fact, making universal arguments in the case of the lives, experiences, and sentiments of Muslim women often are made for the sake of immediacy, or in attempting to find a solution to a problem that transcends time periods, political powers, and even global events.

That being said, there *does* exist a branch of universality (as touched on by Nafisi and Yousafzai) that occurs internally and without retribution within the individual-- that manifestation refers to when an individual can feel *connected* to others outside of his- or her-self. This universal within and via the particular is phenomena that furthers acceptance rather than Othering, and demonstrates “the universality of experience” (Nafisi 359).

Experience and shared histories foster individual connection and sense of belonging, and add an interesting twist to Said’s Other or Spivak’s Subaltern, who are generally recipients of the

“quick fix” of universality. Universals can generalize, but they can also act as “the universal space where we can all live... the real home [that] transcends ethnicity and nationality, gender, sex, and religion” (Nafisi 354).

Individuality and universality are two sides of the same coin that, when used appropriately and thoughtfully, can surpass space and time. For instance, the Muslim mosque so important in both the narratives of Yousafzai and Nafisi acts as an establishment of ideology that serves both particular and universal means – “for Muslims living in the establishment of the West, as well as for older minority communities in Africa and Asia, the mosque is a physical and symbolic site and center of the Islamic community” (Badran 336). The mosque’s ability to be an individual location as well as a global connector mimic that of the combined individuality and unity found within the Othering Muslim women debate.

For Othered Muslim women across the globe, knowing the stories of women like Yousafzai and Nafisi has the potential to offer comforting sentiments of belonging or identification. This connection or self-discovery via other women’s stories manifests in Malala’s own experiences, as she found this sort of relationship in Anne Frank’s journal. Malala came to regard the 13-year-old Jewish girl’s diary as a token of belonging and inspiration while she wrote her own life-story under the pseudonym of “Gul Makai.” Working with a BBC reporter, Malala learned about the way Frank “kept a diary... about how [her family] spent their days and about her own feelings,” and was so inspired after seeing how Frank’s diary “was published and [now serves as] a very powerful record,” that Malala gained the confidence to publish her own “diary” and even mimicked the title “The Diary of Anne Frank” in her chapter title of “The Diary of Gul Makai” (Yousafzai 155). This connection between Muslim Malala and Jewish Anne shows the extent of interconnectedness that is possible amongst writers and readers (especially when both



are of the female gender and/or oppressed), and also illustrates the potential reality of how Muslim (or any) women could find identity and confidence within the pages of Yousafzai's or Nafisi's works.

Although these narratives can also create sentiments of unrest and mischaracterization amongst this same section of society, the ability for such contributions to provide "a sense of communal space broader than [a certain] terrain" is extremely impressive and important (Badran 336). By this, I mean that Yousafzai and Nafisi's works may have caused unrest amidst *some* Muslim populations and feelings of mischaracterization in *certain* Muslim females, but these cases should not deter works like theirs from being published in the first place. The choice of Muslim women to identify (or not) with Nafisi and Yousafzai's stories is up to each and every individual; there is no universal that can say that either author's life experiences accounts for all Muslims' or oppressed female experiences. The only aspect of the stories that should be universal is the existence and availability of these stories in the "communal space" that *all* women can access.

Despite common and popular belief, a mosque or personal narrative is a universal reality for the Muslim faithful of both genders that does not need to be dichotomous, nor synonymous to particulars. These two ideologies of the universal and the particular have, in fact, the ability and potential to work together to foster the freedom, acceptance, and respect for Muslim women that both Yousafzai and Nafisi describe.

## **Occidentalism**

Both *I am Malala* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* engage with the West in their works, and this reference to the 'Occident' in non-Western literature puts the two works into another

interesting category that serves to expand the Othering conversation. Just as Orientalism arose in the West, so, too, did the later notion of “Occidentalism.” Scholar Jamil Ahmed Nutkani of the Islamic Research Index defines Occidentalism as:

A view of the Occident in non-Western literature and a subject that investigates the internal workings of Western civilization. Occidentalism is a discourse producing styled images and essentialised representations of the West... The Occident [can refer] to former colonial nations who conquered and dominated most of the Muslim world at some point in history; [or] ‘the Occident’ actually refers to the United States as the leading Western power and dominant political, cultural, and economic actor in the Muslim world. (Nutmaki 25)

Occidentalism can be interpreted akin to the belief of Professor Hassan Hanf -- leader of the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Cairo and a former researcher at the United Nations University in Tokyo -- as “a positive Arab response to Edward Said’s critique of Western Orientalism” (Nutmaki 27). His viewpoint calls for the need to view “the western civilization from a distance without having any contact with it,” but in a world of globalization, such a perspective can be almost impossible (Nutmaki 28). This inability for uniformity in analyzing the West makes for an ideology that varies from person-to-person and country-to-country, and that, in fact, also overlaps quite often with Edward Said’s Orientalism:

Non-Western people do not perceive the West solely on their own cultural terms; rather, given the presence of Western discursive hegemony, they present the West either as a contrast, or an exemplar, reminding one of the principal practices of Orientalism among the Westerners. Different from the Orientalist discourse, which is mostly made by and for the Westerners, however, the Occidentalist discourse is made by non-Westerners for both Westerners and themselves. (Nutmaki 29)

The fact that Occidentalism is made for *both* the West and the East is an interesting call for the West to reflect both in- and ex-trinsically on its roles as the Self *and* Other. Occidentalism can potentially be analogous to a mirror that, when held by the beholder, will serve as a reminder

of both Othering and Othered instances. Through this “prod,” if you will, the Occident can then theoretically recognize the generalizations its’ nations apply to others, as well the global perceptions of the region. In theory, experiencing Occidentalism could then eliminate the Orientalism and Othering that create the need for the reflective Occident in the first place. In some interpretations, Malala can serve as a representation of this “bridge” between both worlds – the Nobel Prize winner has revolutionized what an Islamic person means on the global stage because she serves as a positive, Muslim role model disrupting the media dialogue of Muslim radicals i.e. the 9/11 attackers, ISIS, suicide bombers, etc.

But since there is no unifying, universal perception of the West and that perceptions vary from individual-to-individual, the interesting notion posited by Nafisi that the only place where “no east and west” can exist in ideas and the imagination gains significant credibility – “The kinds of philistine and narrow-minded arguments and debates that go on in some circles [do] not really exist there” (Nafisi 372). As discussed in the prior section, connective universals exist in the internal space just as the eradication of Self and Other can live in the figurative world. The internationally renowned author, Nobel Laureate, and Pulitzer Prize winner Saul Bellow, mentioned in Nafisi’s studies, “talks in his books about how what threatens the West is its ‘sleeping consciousness,’” and Nafisi states that she “thinks that what is most dangerous for Western readers is when they take freedom for granted, when they feel too much at home, when they don’t look at themselves through the eyes of others” (Nafisi 360).

By looking at themselves through the eyes of others *and* the ones they’ve Othered, the West could answer positively to Bellow’s question of “will [the West] survive the ordeal of freedom?” The status and power of the Western world is akin to the power of the patriarchy that dominates our modern world as a whole, and with such power comes the “freedom” to say, act,

and think however one wants. As seen in global leaders such as the governing bodies of Middle Eastern countries, the U.N., or the U.S. President, the responsibility that comes with freedom can be used and abused each and every day.

As Nafisi states, “If you want to know how free a society is, you look at its women...because they symbolize individual rights” (Nafisi 366). This perspective holds significant weight as the condition and treatment of women are, indeed, important signifiers of the quality of well-being of a society. As Said and Spivak describe, the West has a long history of misrepresenting the East and the statuses of the women in it, and although many analyses of the mistreatment and abuse of women hold merit, many “Orientalists” fail to acknowledge that females in Muslim-dominant countries can also possess rights, freedoms, choice, and equality.

One’s construed interpretations of another doesn’t just occur with the West as the “Self” and the East as the “Other;” Eastern countries also view Western powers with narrow lenses and ingrained biases. For instance, the Swat Valley of Yousafzai’s youth and the Tehran of Nafisi’s teaching career both possess a majority within the community that views the West as a corruptive force (the Taliban or General Zia in Pakistan; the Iranian government, members of the Tehran University teaching staff and students), and another that views the West as a (glorified?) melting pot where education, modernization, civilization, and equality flourish (Malala Yousafzai, Nafisi, Ziauddin Yousafzai).

These perspectives find root in instances of Western thought and society, but just as with Western conceptions of Iran and Pakistan, no perspective can encompass the full picture of the Western world. For those that believe the West is a corruptive influence, one can look at the extreme efforts by the U.K. to save Malala Yousafzai’s life, the freedom and opportunity gained by members of EXMNA in the United States, the support and empowerment received by Malala

and Azar in the U.S. and U.K., or Haqqani's relationship of transparency and collaboration with the United Nations to see how the Western world can be a positive force in many Easterners' lives.

But there's also the flip-side of this coin -- those that view the West as societies of freedom and equality can look at instances such as the #metoo movement that arose out of the society's need to combat the extremely pervasive abusive and offensive treatment towards women in the U.S., the divvying up of the Middle East in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century by the U.K. which caused a century of conflict and unrest in the region, the domineering euro-centric fashion industry that's as invasive as a burqa-pushing government, and the trials faced by any Muslim woman or person who's been persecuted under President Trump of the United States (Muslim-travel ban, lude comments, etc.), to see how un-free the western world can be.

Just as both regions foster creativity, choice, and responsibility, misinformed perceptions and gender (in)equality occur in *both* climates of the East and the West. The West needs to cease the Othering of the East, the East needs to recognize the West as ungeneralizable, for only then will Othering and the subalternization of groups and individuals diminish in Pakistan, Iran, the U.S., the U.K., the U.N., and worldwide.

## Conclusion



Universal and particular, subaltern or Other, culture and identity – all are descriptors as fluid as the sentiments and experiences found within the global population of Muslim women. As post-colonial scholar Homi Bhaba states through his concept of “The Third Space,” the nuances that make-up identity must allow for multiple interpretations within any group of people or community member. Othered women of both Western and Eastern societies fit within Bhaba’s ideological proposition that demands “we rethink our perspective on the identity of culture” through:

the intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. (Bhaba)

Bhaba’s Third Space, although with its own faults, allows for the belief that as “human beings, we can be so many different things” (Nafisi 357). Malala Yousafzai is not just a Muslim woman, Pakistani citizen, or Nobel Laureate, and Azar Nafisi is not just a professor, novelist, or female rights spokesperson – these two women are a complicated mixture of numerous identities of which one title would be insufficient. Numerous interpretations of the Self, the Other, and the past, present, and future work to destroy the “homogenizing, unifying past” of the historical identity of culture, and to work in feminism’s favor to transcend previously-constituted societal customs and norms. Engaging in the Third Space mentality and recognizing all humans as

multifaceted and complex entities is a necessary step in the reduction of the deleterious components of the Self vs. Other dynamic as denoted by Said and Spivak.

Education also plays a critical role in the Othering of Muslim women debate, as illustrated by Yousafzai and Nafisi's educational narratives. Not only do both authors focus on their personal education and the necessity of educating others within their respective works, but both also emphasize that "education is [a] basic right. Not just in the West," but across the globe (Yousafzai 311). Although these two women can differ in specific details about education – Malala incorporates Islam into the debate by emphasizing how "Islam too has given this right. Islam says every girl and every boy should go to school" (Yousafzai 311) – both steadfastly believe that education and knowledge can change the world and many of its issues. Nafisi states that the point of the tools of education – writing and reading – is "not read[ing] about things we are familiar with that make us feel safe and good... The whole point of writing and reading is to learn about things and people that you don't know" (Nafisi 359).

Education and characters within books can help citizens in Pakistan, Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, or in any nation of the world recognize that "women living in Iran [or any other foreign nation]... are not very different from the women living in the States [or any other country] — they both dream about a future for themselves and for the people around them; they fall in love, are jealous, are betrayed, love music, love poetry, love to hold hands" (Nafisi 360). Western or Eastern, Muslim or not, the universality found in the Third Space and education is "how the genuine exchange of cultures should be: a constant dialogue about ourselves and others, a constant critical observation and questioning as well as a celebration of ourselves through the eyes of others" (Nafisi 360).

The experiences of Yousafzai and Nafisi also help to demonstrate Spivak's point that "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears... into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak 306). Malala and Azar are not objects to be used to prove Western ideologies; they are not the subalterns. And yet, they're treated as such. So too are the Muslim women who choose to wear burqas or face coverings, or the 'rogue states' of Middle Eastern nations of Karim Mattar's "Rereading the Rogue State" that defy Western ideologies (Mattar). In assessing these interventions, an argument could be made that Western analyses have ironically caused the dehumanization of Muslim women. This creation of the gendered subaltern simply does not just exist in the East; contrarily, this kind of objectification also rears its ugly head in a Western society where inequality still prevails between the sexes. For example, women in business generally receive lower pay than men; in academia, male teachers are still the majority; and on the street, women are still the ones scared to walk alone at night.

Indeed, when one casts a self-critical eye on our own society in the United States, the objectification of women remains broadcasted everywhere we look — on billboards, commercials, magazines, television shows, movies, music, the #metoo movement, everywhere! Spivak's argument seems soundly supported by the evidence of Yousafzai, Nafisi, Lughod, and so many others — the subaltern woman does not have a voice in the Middle Eastern world, let alone any other area of the globe. Western ideologies are not just creating the subaltern; they're helping keep it alive.



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