

## ABSTRACT

CROWDER, MELISSA ANN. *All Of My Words: Creating Islamic Female Identity Through Iranian Literature and Film.* (Under the direction of Sheila Smith McKoy.)

This thesis examines the state of Islamic feminism in Iran through Iranian fiction and film and supporting Islamic texts. In this study I shall examine Dariush Mehrjui's *Leila*, Tahminah Milani's *The Hidden Half*, and Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*, along with Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita In Tehran* in order to limn the tension of female experience and female oppression in a religiously controlled environment and the innate desire for intellectual, emotional, and physical freedom. Though they do not speak for all women, these three works do offer a compelling breadth of the female experience in Iran. I shall likewise examine the complexities of the experience of female oppression in Iran. Through the examination of these works, a conversation begins in which begins with the fact of female oppression and ends with possibilities for female freedom, a freedom that comes from writing.

ALL OF MY WORDS:  
CREATING ISLAMIC FEMALE IDENTITY  
THROUGH IRANIAN LITERATURE AND FILM

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

North Carolina State University

In partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh, NC

May 2007

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The gift of a pen is an invitation to write.

In appreciation for the invitation, as well as the love and encouragement,  
this is dedicated with great love to my aunt Mary Rowland,  
and in memory of my uncle Charlie Rowland.

## BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Ann Crowder was born near Richmond, Virginia. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from North Carolina State University with a B.A. in English in May 2005. During her undergraduate work, she was introduced to Islamic literature by Dr. Larysa Mykyta, and decided to make this area her life's work. She began her graduate work at North Carolina State University in the fall of 2005. While a graduate student, she participated in the annual SUNY Stony Brook graduate conference, published an article, and became a peer editor at *eSharp*, the University of Glasgow's postgraduate journal. She completed her Master's degree at North Carolina State University in 2007, and embarked on an adventure to the wilds of Wisconsin, where she learned quite a few things about cheese and cold weather.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“The Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself. One is to acquire a teacher. Do you remember the other?”

“Choose a friend.”

From *The Chosen*  
by Chaim Potok

It is my good fortune to have found both teachers and friends, and now I have a forum in which to thank the many people who have been so special. Permit me then, this moment in which to shine a spotlight on some very important people.

Many, many thanks to the committee, for making sure I metaphorically combed my hair and tucked in my shirt before I went out in the world, as well as for challenging me to be a better writer in every step of the writing process. Thank you to Dr. Sheila Smith McKoy, for her guidance, her expertise, her wisdom, her time, and her magic with words. I can only hope that one day I can express myself as eloquently and as gracefully as you. Thank you to Dr. Deborah Hooker, for her many gifts and encouragement, and for telling me, in her own way, that it was okay to write this thesis, and that indeed it ought to be done. Thank you to Dr. Larysa Mykyta, for opening the door and showing me the way, for introducing me to the literature and the culture, and for her encouragement and kindness.

I feel quite sure that many professors never receive all of the gratitude and the recognition they are due. North Carolina State University has compiled a faculty that is second to none. Especial thanks to Dr. Michael Adams, Dr. M. Thomas Hester, Dr. Deborah Hooker, Dr. Leila May, Dr. Larysa Mykyta, Dr. Zola Packman, Dr. Sheila Smith McKoy, Dr. Jon Thompson, and Dr. John Wall.

There is nothing more important than a family. Mine might be unusual, but it is nothing less than amazing. These people challenge me and teach me and nurture me. Life is

always an adventure and always interesting, and for this, and for the neverending love and support, I am grateful to the Crowders and the Horners and the Rowlands. I am especially grateful to my sister, for answering some very odd questions, and to my niece, who was kind enough to look through *Women Without Men* and offer her perspective.

Dear Mary, there was no other possible dedication. From the time I was very small, I loved stories, and Charlie told some of the best. I'll never forget the joy in his voice when he spoke. Thank you for all the stories you tell through your quilts. This is for you, from one collector of stories and weaver of tales to another.

A very special thank you to Mom and Grandma for making all this possible in more ways than the obvious.

As the passage above says, a friend is one of the most important things to do for oneself. My friends are funny and brilliant, and I am lucky to have each one in my life. If it is a miracle to find one truly good friend, then it must be God's Super-Duper Miracle 2000 that I have found so many. Especial thanks and hugs to the merry band of malcontents in Raleigh who made my years at NCSU so enjoyable.

And Travis – there are not enough words to express my gratitude to whatever miracle led you my way. Thank you for your patience and your strength, for reading every draft and making helpful comments, and for teaching me what it really means to believe in someone.

In closing, I quote the ever-eloquent (but never alliterative) Sheila Smith McKoy quoting Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable Of the Sower*: “‘All that you touch/You Change. All that you Change/Changes you.’ Thank you for being an instrument of my change.”

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## Introduction

### A Woman and a Writer: The Islamic Female Identity Crisis Examined Through Iranian Fiction and Film

I went about my way rejoicing, thinking how wonderful it is to be a woman and a writer at the end of the twentieth century.

From *Reading Lolita In Tehran*  
by Azar Nafisi

In February 2007, American journalist Diane Sawyer traveled to the Islamic Republic of Iran to interview the president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Excerpts of this interview were televised on *Good Morning America*. I am quite certain most Americans were surprised to see a female journalist in Iran – I know I was. Frankly, I was a little jealous. I have been fascinated with all things Iranian since 2005, when I first discovered Iranian women’s literature. I wondered how Sawyer managed to show so much hair on the streets of Tehran. I watched in amazement and delight and some confusion as Iranian women filled the scenes: a female book publisher discussing the positive roles many women play in Iran, and a friendly young woman who helped Sawyer shopping. There was a woman at the center of the experience Sawyer describes as most unusual, a woman taking part in an anti-American demonstration shouting “Marg Bar Amrika!” (Death To America!) This woman helped Sawyer through the crowd and kissed her on both cheeks and the forehead and told her in English “I love you!” before departing. Most intriguing, however, was the interview Sawyer procured with Iranian President Ahmadinejad.

Sawyer notes that Ahmadinejad, adhering to a strict Muslim custom in which touching a woman who is not his relative is taboo, will not shake her hand. He appears to face the camera instead of looking at Sawyer, another Muslim custom in which men do not look at the faces of women unrelated to them. He is softspoken, expressing a wish for

“spring throughout the world” and declaring a desire for peace. His first remarks on camera are “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.” President Ahmadinejad answers Sawyer’s questions carefully, although he appears impatient at times and scolds her for what he perceives as her inattention. Sawyer remains focused, asking pointed questions regarding Iranian weapons in Iraq, Israel, and nuclear disarmament.

As part of the program’s modus operandi, Sawyer teased her audience via satellite from Tehran, promising that the president’s parting words to her after the cameras were turned off were quite unusual. To her co-anchor on *Good Morning America*, Robin Roberts, she said, “Robin, I’m going to tell you later this morning his [Ahmedinejad’s] parting words to me, and I bet in a thousand years you could not guess what they were.” A day after piquing public interest in Ahmadinejad’s parting words to her, Sawyer relays them to her audience: “Those were combative questions. Women should not be asking questions about war. Women should ask questions about love, and about family, and about culture.” Ahmedinejad’s statement made me wonder, in spite of the assurances of the Iranian women who appeared on camera and who claimed satisfaction and fulfillment, if Iranian women might still feel limited in the scope of their lives. My research in Iranian women’s film and fiction certainly supports this theory. Perhaps the Iranian women on camera with Sawyer felt stifled by the supposed “woman’s place,” and were unable to speak about their frustration.

In the West, women’s issues have had more public debate than they have had in the Middle East. There are ongoing conversations about dealing with, advocating, or discussing women’s issues and the concept of feminism, but what vocabulary can be used to describe the state of Iranian Muslim women? Iranian/Islamic feminists are attempting to establish both an individual and cultural identity as well as an individual and cultural religious identity

free from established “Islamic” socio-cultural norms. Unfortunately, that blanket statement is too broad to do much more than point out that Islamic feminism is an idealistic notion.

Azar Nafisi calls Islamic feminism a “myth,” claiming that it is

a contradictory notion, attempting to reconcile the concept of women’s rights with the tenets of Islam . . . . It enabled the 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 our place. (262)

No matter how Islamic feminists attempt to portray themselves as Muslim women, they are undercut by a regime which has strict rules for inclusion into religion. So simply by desiring power over their own lives, by desiring freedom, Islamic feminists are branded as un-Muslim. Even worse, these women become part of their own repression through their upbringing, a situation that rings of what is known as the Stockholm Syndrome. In her book *The Caged Virgin*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali claims that “because they have internalized their subordination, they no longer experience it as an oppression by an external force but as a strong internal shield” (31). These women are fighting a losing battle because they cannot fight their religion, and they cannot convince the holy men, the representatives of God on earth, to change what they believe regarding the role women ought to play and so change the law.

The struggle against religiously enforced norms is not limited to Muslim women, and while the solutions non-Muslim women have found may not be applicable, it is nonetheless germane to examine the precedent. For example, Roman Catholic women could be virtual nonentities in that patriarchal religion, but that religion does not have the rule of law in

Western society. Nor does the Roman Catholic Church enjoy the great myth of “culture,” that foregrounds arguments against abuse done in the name of Islam (31). The Roman Catholic Church has learned to live with a secular society while maintaining its faithful. I do not mean to imply that Islam could or should follow the example of the Roman Church, merely to point out that a religious authority that once ruled its followers with an iron fist, dictating every aspect of their lives (including the veiling of women), has learned to live in a secular society and coexist peacefully with people of other faiths or no faith, there is precedent and place for Islam to do the same.

Let me be perfectly clear: I do not wish to be disrespectful to Islam, nor do I wish to criticize the faith. Instead, I take issue with what are abusive practices which are unfortunately rampant within Islamic communities. Though these practices are sometimes embedded in cultural mores and are therefore often considered sacrosanct, the discussion regarding abuse can and should occur. Religious explanations to excuse and explain atrocities are not confined to Islam: the Bible has been used to rationalize slavery in the United States. Furthermore, inherent misogyny can be found in the three major monotheistic religions: women are not permitted to become priests in the Catholic Church. It is still part of the daily prayers for a Jewish man to express thanks to God that he is not female. Forced male dominance over women has been part of the history of Christianity and Judaism, and to some extent is part of the present, as it is with Islam. As Western Feminists can attest, there is a fascination with proper female behavior and controlling female sexuality that crosses geographic, ethnic, and religious boundaries<sup>1</sup> (19-20). My concern is to remove the abuse from religious practice, which will then allow for more freedom for the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Though there are numerous books on this subject, for which a simple glance under the heading “Women’s Studies” in the local bookstore will suffice, I suggest Dee Graham’s *Loving To Survive*, Geraldine Brooks’s *Nine Parts Of Desire*, and Jan Goodwin’s *Price Of Honor* for a start.

Both Azar Nafisi and Ali both point out that the oppression of women is stifling Islamic culture, a point that Irshad Manji also emphasizes in her book, *The Problem With Islam*: “the trouble with Islam is that lives are small and lies are big” (3). The solution lies in education and literacy, in reading and writing, in words and ideas. This is evident in Nafisi’s beautiful work, which is clear in argument and purpose and never strays from a single point: this is no way for anyone to live. Nafisi’s book is a memoir, a feminist manifesto, a call to arms, a defense of literature and a testament to the power of reading and writing. It is an important text, as is Hirs Ali’s *The Caged Virgin*, an essay on the problems of Islamic culture, as well as a political document outlining her ideas on solving the problem. These two examples of Islamic literature are more blatant, but the “woman problem” is at the heart of much of Iranian film and Iranian women’s writing, as well as political and social texts such as Hirs Ali’s and Manji’s. Women have found themselves in the unfortunate position of being written, but as they invoke the myth of Scheherazade and begin to write themselves and read themselves, they attempt to write themselves free. In this study I shall examine Dariush Mehrjui’s *Leila*, Tahminah Milani’s *The Hidden Half*, and Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women Without Men*. Though they do not speak for all women, an idea that I think would be abhorrent to their authors, these three works do offer a compelling breadth of the female experience in Iran. I shall examine these three works along with Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita In Tehran* in order to limn the tension of female experience and female oppression in a religiously controlled environment and the innate desire for intellectual, emotional, and physical freedom.

In examining these three texts as well as Nafisi’s memoir, I shall likewise examine the complexities of the experience of female oppression in Iran. In the discussion of Dariush

Mehrjui's *Leila* in chapter one, I focus on Dee Graham's concept of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome<sup>2</sup> and find evidence to support her hypothesis that the performance of gender in an oppressive society is a Stockholm Syndrome response. Mehrjui's protagonist Leila acts as an agent of her own oppression in an environment where her choices are limited, demonstrating that the cycle of abuse can be harder to break when women "choose" to be oppressed.

Mehrjui's film exposes that the nature of male dominance is not specifically perpetrated by males, yet it is a system from which males believe they benefit.

My examination of the Iranian female experience continues in chapter two, where I use Tahminah Milani's film *The Hidden Half*. In this film, Milani uses the writing of the self via a diary as a means of contesting a system which denies female selfhood. Milani's protagonist Fereshteh hearkens to the mythical Scheherazade, a woman who literally existed because of her stories. Fereshteh uses her own autobiography in her diary to reach out to her husband and strengthen their relationship. In doing so, she strengthens herself by asserting her own voice and story. Milani's controversial film limns the problems inherent in a system where a woman's perception of herself is far removed from how others perceive her. Through her protagonist, Milani demonstrates the importance of writing to the exhibition of true self.

In chapter three I focus on Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*, in which magical realism functions as a critical tool. In Parsipur's fantastic novel, a female space is created and females assert themselves and take charge; however, Parsipur is careful to create a utopic space where women live harmoniously with enlightened men. Her novel limns the tensions between the reality of Iranian female life and the precedent for new possibilities to

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<sup>2</sup> The Stockholm Syndrome, which I shall discuss in great detail in chapter one, is a psychological phenomenon in which a prisoner or victim begins to identify with her captor or abuser to the extent that the victim sides with the abuser.

be constructed out of the destruction of the old system. Parsipur's book is revolutionary in her position on male and female relationships and her critical stance on Islam's emphasis on the importance of female virginity.

I engage in a conversation which begins with the fact of female oppression and ends with possibilities for female freedom, a freedom that comes from writing. In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous wrote of what women's writing "*will do*" (257). In this project, I suggest what women's writing does, and more importantly, what it must do. The writers and filmmakers I consider here enable Iranian women to assert their own identities and to free themselves from their oppression.

## Chapter 1

### Dancing With the Jailer: Iranian Film and the Societal Stockholm Syndrome

The worst crime committed by totalitarian mind-sets is that they force their citizens, including their victims, to become complicit in their crimes. Dancing with your jailer, participating in your own execution, that is an act of utmost brutality . . . . The only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer, is to find a way to preserve one's individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other.

From *Reading Lolita in Tehran*  
by Azar Nafisi

In order to fully understand the complex issues of Islamic Feminism, it is necessary to examine the complicity of Islamic women in maintaining the cultural practices that shape their cultural and social position. Those fighting for women's liberation are engaging in a campaign against the traditions that are maintained by those women. Even more complex is the manner in which Islamic Feminists must contend with the culturally dominant interpretation of their own religion and Muslim clerics who are representatives of God on earth<sup>3</sup>. Because of these circumstances, at times Islamic Feminists are perceived as fighting against God, which is a devastating false accusation. Islamic Feminists are fighting an impossible battle against the majority opinion and the prevailing religious ideology, which is also the prevailing political ideology. This ideology is essentially a set of definitions for life, definitions which delineate proper behavior. In turn, these definitions act as a set of criteria to define who is and is not a member of the acceptable group. For women, this set of norms

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<sup>3</sup> Islam is actually not a religion that is traditionally supposed to be interpreted by the individual – neither is the Koran. Cf. Aslan and Manji re: interpretations. Also, in *The Trouble With Islam*, Irshad Manji claims that there is no Koranic precedent for Muslim clerics.

define who is and is not an acceptable Muslim female<sup>4</sup>. This power over definition makes words incredibly powerful in this regime. Thanks to definitions given by the rulers, definitions which act as standards of behavior create instability within the individual who does not fit the definition exactly. This instability makes nonconformity dangerous, which leads to the development of fear for the individual who cannot live up to the regime's exacting standards. To clarify the direness of being different, consider the following statement by Jan Goodwin: "Labeling a Muslim an infidel or unbeliever is the same as declaring him an apostate, and under fundamentalist Islam it is considered to be a sentence of execution" (12). Being outside the standard can result in death – and as it is impossible for every person to be the same, every person to manufacture themselves into the ideal, there is undoubtedly a great deal of fear rampant in this society. Fear of being identified as different leads to an emotional and psychological crisis, one in which the safety of oppression is preferable to the insecurity of trying to determine one's own identity. This phenomenon echoes the Stockholm Syndrome, a psychological phenomenon in which a captive or victim identifies with the abuser and often chooses to remain in the abusive situation, despite opportunities to escape. Dee Graham posits that the Stockholm Syndrome is not an individual phenomenon but is instead an abuse perpetrated by a society and culture against women. Therefore, the Stockholm Syndrome is not culturally specific, which eases the tension of applying this "Western theory" to this aspect of an Islamic culture. Many Islamic women writers create characters and situations which show signs of this/these disorder(s), especially refusal or inability to escape the abusive situation. In this chapter, I shall examine

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<sup>4</sup> In *Reading Lolita In Tehran*, Nafisi relates a story told by one of her students regarding a university professor's lecture on the differences between a Muslim Girl and a Christian Girl: "One was a virgin . . . white and pure, keeping herself for her husband and her husband only. The other, well, there was not much you could say about [the Christian Girl] except that she was not a virgin" (30).

the ways in which the societal Stockholm Syndrome developed and became prevalent and continues through a calcified version of Islam that rules the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Many scholars note that in Islam women are the keepers of family honor and tradition, and it is with this tradition that women are oppressed. However, because of their responsibility as keepers of honor, women frequently act as agents of their own or other's oppression<sup>5</sup>. This paradox is central to Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita In Tehran*. Written after the Nafisis' emigration to the US, *Reading Lolita In Tehran* still manages to express much of the horror of Nafisi's situation in Iran with the added clarity of hindsight. In this unusual work, Nafisi uses Western literature as a metaphor to understand and explain the events leading up to, during, and after the 1979 revolution, and in this way bridges the cultural gap between her Western audience and the Iranian and Muslim mores and norms she describes. The paradoxical nature of the role of women is likewise central to Dariush Mehrjui's film *Leila*. *Leila's* significance as a film is due much in part to the fact that it is a film in which the love between the two main characters is shown to the audience, and not told. This is even more remarkable in light of the conceits of Iranian cinema, because the couple rarely touches onscreen<sup>6</sup>. *Leila* and Reza instead show affection for each other in how they care for each other, the words they use, the looks they share, their laughter and joking and obvious deep friendship. Mehrjui is also careful to show the love between the two families and the couple – even Reza's horrific mother is made sympathetic because she acts out of love for her son, for her family, and a deep sense of tradition. In *Leila*, Mehrjui

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this concept, cf. Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin*, Geraldine Brooks's *Nine Parts of Desire*, and Jan Goodwin's *Price of Honor*.

<sup>6</sup> Iranian cinema is incredibly self-conscious – female characters do not remove their headscarves even when it would be normal for an Iranian woman to do so, such as when she is alone in her house, because she is onscreen. Male and female characters rarely touch and never touch each other with affection – no kissing, no hugging. It should be unnecessary to mention that there is no sex, nor any allusion to sex, not even between married couples on film. In the one scene in *Leila* filmed in a bedroom, Reza stands in the door. Only *Leila* is in the bed, covered to her chin, her face hidden in darkness.

exposes that even in the best possible circumstances, an oppressive regime only results in destruction. The couple at the center of *Leila* are happy in their marriage, deeply in love. Unfortunately, their love cannot survive the pressures of a strict Islamic regime, in which neither one's personal wishes or desires are respected. In this film, the women are the keepers of tradition and oppression, and the women perpetuate tradition and oppression. Leila's mother-in-law badgers her to allow Reza to take a second wife, and then badgers her into convincing him to do it. Furthermore, in being the one to ask her husband to marry another woman, an act which she finds despicable, Leila unpersons herself in the name of tradition and familial pressure. Leila chooses to destroy herself in the name of tradition. Despite her obvious desperation, and the easy assumption that she has no choice, there is a distinct ambiguity to Leila's victimization because she makes the choice. Often in the film, the only attention she attracts is negative attention. Despite the pain it causes her she pursues this attention, instead of removing herself from the situation by ignoring her mother-in-law and not answering the telephone. However, Mehrjui indicates through close-ups on Leila's miserable face that to Leila her behavior is determined both externally and internally – to Leila there is no choice. These circumstances culminate in Leila's oppression, a condition which she both helps and allows in a situation which is indicative of a paradoxical phenomenon known as the Stockholm Syndrome.

In her book *Loving To Survive: Sexual Terror, Men's Violence, and Women's Lives*, Dee Graham posits that the Stockholm Syndrome can occur societally, not just individually, and that the “normal” performance of gender is a function of the syndrome. For Graham, the idea that gender roles are biologically determined is mostly ridiculous – the “feminine” develops out of fear. She claims:

Femininity, then, is attributed to those who are weaker, those who are victims, and those who submit. Femininity represents the survival strategy of a victim of threatened or actual violence, who, because she or he sees no way to escape or to successfully win in a violent showdown, assumes the role of subordinate. Femininity is also attributed to one who attempts to win over an enemy by inducing that foe to stop its violence and threats of violence. Here I argue that femininity is a blue print for how to get along with one's enemy by trying to win over the enemy. Femininity is a Stockholm Syndrome response. (187)

Inherent in this passage is the concept that to be female is to be afraid. Fear is universal – though it is implicit in Graham's book that she is dealing specifically with Western women, she makes note that her findings can easily be attributed to any oppressed group anywhere in the world. Fear determining behavior cuts across culture and society to power struggles inherent in any social structure, power struggles that ultimately end with one group as dominant. Graham's definition of the Stockholm Syndrome is quite long, and contains a bulleted list of components and symptoms, of which some but not all must be present for Stockholm Syndrome. She precedes this list with a quick definition of the overarching effects of the Stockholm Syndrome, noting:

The Stockholm Syndrome, named for the behavioral phenomena observed during and after a hostage situation in Stockholm, Sweden in 1973 is a set of paradoxes which seem outside the norm of rational human thought and behavior, particularly when considering a threat to one's life or physical and emotional well-being. (11)

I will repeat here an idea from the introduction, in order that my purpose is clearly understood. In no way is it my intent to be disrespectful to Islam. It is important to consider

that in this instance cultural mores, despite their origination in religious or indigenous practices can be abusive<sup>7</sup>. The point of contention in this discussion is to call attention to those actions which may be undertaken in the name of Islam but which infringe on human rights. In regards to this sensitive matter, I quote Irshad Manji from her book *The Trouble With Islam*:

You'll want to assure me that what I'm describing in this open letter to you isn't "true" Islam. Frankly, such a distinction wouldn't have impressed Prophet Muhammad, who said that religion is the way we conduct ourselves toward others – not theoretically, but actually. By that standard, how Muslims behave is Islam. To sweep that reality under the rug is to absolve ourselves of responsibility for our fellow human beings. (3)

Manji's statement undercuts the idea that practices embedded in a culture are not to be criticized. She makes a point about the inherent humanity which makes all of us responsible for each other, underlining the idea that human rights trump cultural rights. Furthermore, she asserts the concept that because Islam can and is being used as a tool of oppressors, all Muslims are at risk for being drawn into the oppression, either as agents or as the oppressed or both. In order to clearly define the Stockholm Syndrome, I shall examine each of Graham's eleven points of definition in light of Mehrjui's film and Nafisi's memoir, so that her views of the societal Stockholm Syndrome can be seen as the manner in which the cultural impress of Islamic tradition works as the oppressor. Mehrjui gives no specific villain

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<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the reason for these practices may have been lost, and the rituals and practices are merely being repeated out of habit. In her book *Eat, Pray, Love* Elizabeth Gilbert tells of an Indian Guru who had a large following. Every day, when they met to meditate on God, the Guru's cat would wander through the room and disrupt the meditation. The Guru ordered the cat to be tied to a pole outside. Eventually, the cat died. The group fell apart, because the meditation could not happen without the cat tied outside to the pole. Gilbert claims that this tale is used as a warning: "Be very careful . . . not to get too obsessed with the repetition of religious ritual for its own sake" (206). This sentiment concurs with Manji's emphasis on the examination of religion and religious practice, which she calls "Project Ijtihad."

character in the film. Every major player in this tragedy suffers greatly, and no one in the film gets what they desired so much, what they worked so hard for: Leila never has her child, Reza loses his beloved wife and later his second wife, and Reza's mother is left to raise the female child for whom she schemed and destroyed her son's marriage. Essentially, the captor in Mehrjui's film is tradition – traditional values, norms, and mores which Leila cannot escape. Tradition becomes Leila's prison, but tradition takes a female face in Leila's mother-in-law. The victim in this instance is both easy to determine and amorphous.

Though the main character Leila is clearly a victim of society, family, and herself, she is not the only victim in the film. Her husband, Reza, is also victimized by society and social pressures as exhibited by and through his mother, and perhaps even Reza's mother is a victim in this instance of the pressures of a society and traditions which she feels powerless to ignore and compelled to perpetuate. This oppressive society in which Graham's concept of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome is rampant makes female oppression problematic for the entire society, not only the direct victim of the oppression, which is doubly so in this case where the oppressor is tradition.

The men in Mehrjui's film are almost totally powerless in a culture of male dominance. Both Reza and his father seem to be subordinate to the wishes of Reza's mother, who is subordinate to her culturally imbedded need for a grandson. This grandson is the only powerful male in this film, but he never arrives. Of the three major male characters in the film, none are able to actually do anything. Reza is hyper-masculine and modern, always well-groomed and wearing Western clothes. Despite his appearance as male in the most Western possible aspect, he is completely subordinate to the wishes of his mother. Mehrjui counterpoints him with his father, who wears traditional Iranian dress. Despite these obvious

differences, Reza's father is like him in one important way: both men are passive compared to the dominant wife/mother/mother-in-law, who moves ahead with her own desires despite the vocalized dissent of both men. Leila's brother, Hassan, is the last major male figure Mehrjui uses. Hassan functions like a bookend – he is there in the beginning and at the end of the film, but is not present at all when there is trouble, despite Reza's desire to confide in him. Leila asks Reza not to speak to her brother, creating another instance in which a woman acts as a divider in the relationships of the men<sup>8</sup>. Hassan introduces Leila and Reza in the beginning, and then he is present at the end, when Leila has left Reza<sup>9</sup>. The words of the men are nothing – despite their disagreement with the second marriage, they do not stop it. In fact, Reza tells Leila “I wish you'd stand up to me and scream at me telling me you don't want me to take another wife instead of pushing me like this,” indicating that the power in this situation lies with the females (Mehrjui). Because in this film the men have little or no power, they are both hypermasculinized and demasculinized. Mehrjui uses this lack of power to highlight that male dominance destroys relationships everywhere within the community, and is not wholly the fault of the men – often the socialization of the community creates a cycle of male dominance which is continued by the women. Mehrjui shows the cycle by using women to perpetuate another instance of male dominance through Leila and her mother-in-law's quest for Reza's son, though in this instance that male never comes. The domination, however, is absolute, and with the absence of the male it becomes clear that this is a female domination. This usurpation of power to oppress in a society which is ruled by

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<sup>8</sup> In this act, Leila shows two powerful and aggressive sides of her personality – she is dividing the relationship between her husband and his friend, as her mother-in-law has come between her husband and his son. Furthermore, Reza's easy acquiescence implies that Leila has power in this relationship – she does not want him to talk to Hassan, and so he does not.

<sup>9</sup> This is actually an example of the most accommodating circumstances possible – most women in Islamic countries do not have the opportunity to leave their husbands, and even if they do, they are often not welcomed or allowed back at their father's home. Cf. Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane, A Sister to Scheherazade* by Assia Djebar, and the film *Osama*, dir. Siddiq Marmak.

male dominance both as a concept and as a fact is a curious paradox – why do women seek to victimize women and therefore victimize themselves? The answer is in a paradoxical set of circumstances that contribute to the phenomenon of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome.

The Societal Stockholm Syndrome describes a phenomenon in which captivity and oppression work on a group of people, not just an individual. Though essentially having similar circumstances as an individual case, the Societal Stockholm Syndrome's broad scope indicates that oftentimes what is considered "normal" behavior for a member of a group under duress (i.e., Iranian women) is instead a Stockholm Syndrome response. An analysis of *Leila* in terms of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome supports this hypothesis. Before beginning the analysis of the eleven points that Graham determines make up the Stockholm Syndrome, I shall analyze what Graham identifies as the four precursors to the Stockholm Syndrome. This set of conditions must exist in order for Stockholm Syndrome to develop. Graham describes their importance, claiming:

Stockholm Syndrome describes a unitary phenomenon observed whenever four conditions co-exist. These four *precursors* are the following:

1. perceived threat to survival and the belief that one's captor is willing to carry out that threat
2. the captive's perception of some small kindness from the captor within a context of terror
3. isolation of perspectives other than those of the captor
4. perceived inability to escape. (33)

These four precursors do exist within the context of the film. Leila can see no way out of the situation at hand. The four facts that seem to wall her in are: she is infertile, her husband

Reza is the only son of his mother, her mother-in-law insists that Reza must have children, and the law of the land permits polygyny. Even though she has a means out of the situation, as her husband repeatedly tells her that he loves her and he does not want children, Leila does not see a way to escape. She believes that she will never get away from the guilt, shame, and pressure from her mother-in-law, which clearly fulfills number four. Furthermore, Mehrjui uses many different perspectives from many characters in the film, notably from Reza, Reza's father, and Reza's sisters, all of whom disagree with the idea of Reza's second marriage. Regardless of her own disapproval of the second marriage, Leila only accepts the perspective of her traditional mother-in-law who shames her by admonishing: "Be a lady, Leila, let him take another wife!" (Mehrjui). This fulfills number three: "isolation of perspectives other than those of the captor" (Graham 33). Leila, acting as an agent of her own oppression, is isolated from other perspectives by her own shame and guilt. Because her mother-in-law is incredibly loving toward her (manipulative as the affection may be) within the larger family unit which is very loving and affectionate to Leila, she can easily see them as kind and not cruel. Additionally, her mother-in-law's gift of a pearl necklace during the same visit when she convinces Leila to be the one to talk Reza into the second marriage is an example of the "small kindness" necessary to fulfill number two: "the captive's perception of some small kindness from the captor within a context of terror" (33). In this instance it is an implicit bribe during a scene when the audience is finally able to see Leila's anger and frustration in addition to her despondence. Though she does not (and perhaps cannot) put her anger into words, Mehrjui shows her venting her anger and frustration while cleaning up the food and tea she happily prepared for her mother-in-law's visit and then breaking the necklace, scattering pearls into the sink. At the base of all this, there is Leila's fear. Leila is

afraid, which prevents Leila from expressing anger to her mother-in-law. She fears that perhaps her mother-in-law is right, and that if she does not find a way for Reza to have the children her mother-in-law swears he wants he will leave her<sup>10</sup>. Here it is obvious that the first two criteria (“perceived threat to survival and the belief that one’s captor is willing to carry out that threat” and “the captive’s perception of some small kindness from the captor within a context of terror”) of Graham’s list of precursors are fulfilled (33). Leila’s fear and anxiety place everything into a context of terror for her. She knows that if she fails to comply, Reza’s mother will turn from pressuring her to pressuring him – and she also knows that Reza has submitted to maternal pressure before. Reza admits to Leila in anger that he “was forced even to marry [her]” leaving the viewer to conclude that despite his great love for his wife and his happiness with her, he did not wish to marry and it was only the constant pressure of his mother that forced him to matrimony. Note that the four precursors that Graham defines as evidence of Stockholm Syndrome are evident in Mehrjui’s portrait of Leila. Since the four precursors are evident in the film, Graham’s formula posits that Leila’s development of the Stockholm Syndrome is inevitable. Though many of Graham’s eleven conditions overlap these four precursors, an examination of each of the eleven points is useful as a tool to understand the overlap of terror, paradox, and perceived imprisonment within the film.

Graham’s first point is the paradoxical nature of the captor: “captors who showed their hostages kindness while they terrorized them with threats of physical violence and death.” (13). While the threat to Leila’s physical well-being is not explicit in the film, Mehrjui repeatedly shows the threat to her psychological well-being by her mother-in-law’s frequent allusions to the shame she will feel later, when Reza does what his mother considers

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<sup>10</sup> Reza swears that he does not want children, making the matter more confusing for Leila.

inevitable and takes another wife. This is also a threat to Leila's emotional and psychological health, since the loss of Reza's love is something she fears greatly. In regards to psychological health, Graham suggests that a "threat to psychological survival occurs any time a person's psychological survival is threatened. Emotional abuse can pose a threat to a person's psychological survival . . . . Threat of abandonment is experienced by some as a threat to physical and/or psychological survival" (34). Mehrjui certainly portrays this pervasive fear in the first moments of the film, when Leila anxiously questions Reza about what he would do if she could not have any children. She inquires pointedly if he will divorce her if she cannot have children, indicating a fear of abandonment by Reza. Despite his assurances to her that he will not leave her and that he does not want children, Leila believes only her mother-in-law who tells her the opposite. Leila cannot find a way to escape this psychological prison, which brings us to Graham's second point, "hostages who did not escape when they were apparently able to do so" (13). It is important to note the difference between logical behavior outside the context of stress and terror and logical behavior within the context of stress and terror, and with this point the paradoxical nature of the Stockholm Syndrome becomes difficult to comprehend. To the outsider, Leila has every opportunity to escape. Reza offers her a way out, and often tries to pry her away from thinking herself into her prison, all to no avail. The point here is that no one's interpretation of logical behavior matters except the victim's. On this subject, Graham suggests:

These cognitive distortions provide an interpretation of the victims' behavior *to the victims themselves*. The content of the distortions, and the fact that the distortions provide meaning to the victims about their own behavior, help the victims believe they are in control. The cognitive distortions provide the only sense of control in a

life-threatening relationship, and thus cannot be abandoned. (Graham 40)

It is crucial to the victim herself that her behavior be sane and logical, even though through the eyes of any other it may not be so. In this way, Leila's actions seem like the work of a self-loathing woman, or a mad woman, or a self-loathing mad woman; but her character is not self-loathing or crazy. Leila sees herself as perfectly sane, loving, generous, and dutiful – only in the most secret places of her heart does she loathe this course of events, which she sees as inevitable. She hurts herself out of love for Reza. Although she would not see it in this light, she hurts Reza out of love for him. She allows herself to be hurt by her mother-in-law's love for Reza. Leila and her mother-in-law paradoxically destroy a truly beautiful love in the name of love. What makes this instance so compelling and complex is the paradox (which is neither purely Islamic nor purely Western) of a woman who is being emotionally abused by a woman who loves her. This devaluing of an individual for the perceived greater good of the group is a common theme in Islam, which began in a tribal society which valued the group over the individual<sup>11</sup>. The fact that every hurtful action in the film is undertaken in the name of love and out of a sense of duty to the family merely nuances the idea of a tribal mentality to show how the individual who subordinates her/himself to this mentality can damage the unit instead of strengthen it.

Love instead of cruelty or greed underscores this instance of the Stockholm Syndrome and fulfills Graham's third point, that there will be a "development of emotional closeness between the hostages and captors" (13). As this is a family situation, the development of closeness seems inevitable; however, Mehrjui demonstrates that the love between Reza and Leila is something in which both their families find great joy. An early scene which shows Reza's family showering Leila with gifts on her birthday, making much

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin*, Aslan's *No God But God*, and Armstrong's *A History of God* for more.

of the young woman, shows how much regard they hold for her. Reza's father presents his daughter-in-law with a ring which once belonged to his mother; in a later phone conversation it is revealed that the ring belonged to his mother whom he loved very much<sup>12</sup>. Despite the emphasis on Leila, Mehrjui literally interrupts the party scene with the mother-in-law's desire for a grandson. Leila's mother-in-law addresses the camera in one of only two direct statements which break the fourth wall<sup>13</sup>. She says: "How I wish to see Reza's son"<sup>14</sup>(Mehrjui). It is obvious from Leila's gregarious welcome when her mother-in-law drops by unannounced that she feels great affection for the woman whom Leila calls "madar jan," (mother dear). Additionally, Leila is always deferential to her mother-in-law, making it obvious that she feels great respect for her. It is out of this that my reading of Graham's focus on "hostages who identified with their captors, taking on the captors' attitudes and beliefs . . ." becomes significant (13). In this case, Leila's mother-in-law is the "captor," and she has captured Leila's mind. Leila allows no other viewpoint to hold any credence against the words of her mother-in-law. When she is first approached by her mother-in-law regarding a second wife for Reza, Leila says in a voice-over: "She [her mother-in-law] probably knows her child better than I do . . . I don't have children so how would I know(sic). Maybe she's right" (Mehrjui). Despite Leila's easy capitulation to her mother-in-law, it is difficult to believe that Reza would lie to his wife about the issue of children. Mehrjui uses this contradiction to create tension within the marriage – regardless of his veracity on the issue, Leila's distrust of him damages their relationship and creates a distance

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<sup>12</sup> Also, mothers are revered in Muslim societies – in her essay "Forbidden Gaze/Severed Sound," Assia Djebar notes that there is a Muslim saying based on a verse in the Koran that "Paradise is found at the feet of mothers" (142).

<sup>13</sup> The "fourth wall" is a theatrical and cinematic convention in which the actors ignore the audience and/or camera and instead act as though there is an invisible fourth wall. Breaking the fourth wall dissolves this invisible barrier between actor and audience and allows the actor to address the audience directly.

<sup>14</sup> The other statement addressed directly to the camera is spoken by one of Reza's sisters: "Reza really loves tea. He's always drinking it."

that Reza cannot seem to find a way to overcome. This distrust certainly builds on Graham's focus on the paradoxes in which "hostages . . . came to believe that those trying to win their release, not the captors, wanted to kill them" and "hostages . . . perceived those trying to win their release as enemies and captors as friends" (13). In Leila's case, as my reading should make clear, the issues relating to her own captivity revolve around issues of trust that lead to her own entrapment by those she trusts as well as by herself. Leila trusts her mother-in-law, who consciously or unconsciously is hurting her; and she mistrusts her husband who wants her to be happy. At the end of the film, she claims that "he was dead to me." This statement indicates that his place in her life had been usurped by another, one who wished for her to remain in the prison of tradition<sup>15</sup>. Leila's immersion into traditional Iranian Muslim culture seems absolute at the end of the film, which can be seen by her choice of dress. Her mother-in-law always wears the traditional black chador. Leila dresses modestly in a coat and scarf throughout the film, but after Reza's second marriage she wears a chador to flee the house. With her chador, Mehrjui literally and symbolically immerses Leila in tradition.

After she adopts the traditional chador, Leila does not speak on camera again – her voice is heard only in a voice-over. Mehrjui uses her silence to demonstrate a paradox of women's silence. Because she chooses to be silent, Leila cannot articulate the horror and devastation within her. Alternatively, perhaps Leila is not able to articulate how she feels and what she thinks, and that is why she does not speak. Graham's concept of the inability of hostages to "acknowledge the full extent of their terror until the event is over" is effective for my reading of the ways in which Mehrjui refuses to allow viewers to witness a full articulation of Leila's pain. In Leila's instance, the pain is literally unspeakable. Clearly devastated, she cannot even speak to what is inside her; yet she still does not blame the

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<sup>15</sup> I am deliberately vague here – "one" refers to Leila or her mother-in-law, or both of them.

traditionalist mother-in-law for the chain of events that lead to this destruction. The trauma of her experience – in keeping with the tenets of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome, does not allow her to show anger at her mother-in-law, her “captor” for “holding her hostage” to tradition<sup>16</sup>. Leila does not blame her mother-in-law, although Reza does. Even at the end of the film, her voice is gentle and only mildly amused as she relates the irony that Reza’s only child, the child left to his mother to raise, is female. Her lack of animosity indicates a link to tradition and a complicity within this kind of female-to-female emotional and psychological battery. In her book *The Caged Virgin*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali notes that

In the traditionally oriented Muslim communities, it is often the mothers who keep their daughters under their thumbs and the mothers-in-law who make the lives of their daughters-in-law unbearable. Cousins and aunts gossip endlessly about one another and about others. The effect of this social control is that Muslim women maintain their own repression.” (4)

Therefore, Leila has accepted her place in the female chain of oppression. There is a moment of hope for her and for her “daughter” at the end of the film, no matter how ambiguous, when Leila chuckles about how Baran, Reza’s daughter, will react on learning how she came into existence. Will Leila stay separate from Reza, or will she return and raise his child? If she does, will she turn into her mother-in-law and teach Baran to imprison herself or will she learn from her experiences and teach Baran to avoid her prisons? Outside of all this is the ultimate question, really – does Leila have a choice in any of these matters? She has embraced the safety of tradition and the security of a familiar unhappiness and dissatisfaction, a state of mind that Graham describes, claiming that “hostages . . . came to

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<sup>16</sup> This speaks to another point of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome, “hostages who were grateful for, and won over by, small kindnesses shown by captors and were seemingly without anger at their captors for holding them hostage and for threatening them with physical violence and death” (13).

see their captors as a source of security and humaneness and the police as a source of terror” (13). For Leila, safety is in tradition, and it is from this conclusion that her return to her husband seems inevitable. It is her traditional place, one that she will occupy as many women before her have. Hirsi Ali claims that “Muslim women are socialized to believe in the importance and rightness of their own oppression,” which would rationalize their oppression in terms they can understand (61). By this logic, if the oppression of Muslim women is not right and just, then their lives have lost importance. As is true of Graham’s hostages who “felt they owed their lives to their captors” many Muslim women believe that their role is crucial to the survival of the Muslim world and in turn believe that the Muslim world cannot survive without their subordination and oppression<sup>17</sup> (13). The oppressed do owe their existences to their captors, not just in a physiological sense but an emotional and psychological one. Because their oppression validates them as a person, as a woman of faith, it becomes the essence of their existence. They are, therefore, grateful for the opportunity to be oppressed because it defines them.

This defining oppression becomes a wall on both sides, defining a female as either woman or unwoman and Muslim or infidel interchangeably. The definitions deal with questions of immortality and faith as well as acceptance, and the usurpation of personhood follows. Because Leila now accepts the definition superimposed on her, she allows the regime to seize her individuality. Mehrjui uses Leila’s silence to acknowledge that the words she might use no longer hold any meaning outside the meaning prescribed by those in power. This destabilization of the female self is what allows for a system of oppression and captivity, which in turn supports my reading of the text as an example of the Stockholm

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. the letters mentioned in Mehrangiz Kar’s essay “Death of a Mannequin” from Iranian martyrs who claimed that a woman’s veiling was as precious and sacred an act as their sacrifice of life for religion and nation.

Syndrome. Furthermore, the instability of words becomes a tool of the oppressor, which then becomes another method of control. In her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi describes this verbal instability in which words which used to hold one meaning have been given greater power leading to oppressive fear. In the following passage, she analyzes a hurtful anonymous message left to her supervisors, “**The adulterous Nafisi should be expelled:**”

I knew and they knew the word *adulterous*, like all other words confiscated by the regime, had lost its meaning. It was merely an insult, intended to make you feel dirty and disqualified. I also knew that this could happen anywhere: the world is full of angry, pathological individuals pushing pieces of paper with obscene messages under doors.

What hurt, and still hurts, is that this mentality ultimately ruled our lives. This was the same language that the official papers, the radio and television and the clerics from their pulpits used to discredit and demolish their foes. And most of them succeeded at their task. What made me feel cheap, and in some way complicit, was the knowledge that so many people had been deprived of their livelihood on the basis of similar charges – because they had laughed loudly in public, because they had shaken hands with a member of the opposite sex. Should I thank my lucky stars that I had escaped with no more than one line scrawled on a cheap piece of paper? (Nafisi *Lolita* 189-90)

This passage offers a glimpse into the panic of an unstable world, and the peculiar paradox of gratitude within the confines of cruelty and emotional and psychological abuse. Nafisi astutely identifies the uncertainty of a given word’s definitions; however, the use of the insult

was meant to make her feel “disqualified,” to tell her in no uncertain terms that she was different, and in this regime, different is wrong. Nafisi knows all too well the pressures faced by and punishments exacted against those who do not conform. She mentions her own complicity to her oppression, in this case because of the many other oppressed women. The passage ends with a sarcastic allusion to gratitude, which recalls Graham’s ideas regarding the victim’s bonding to the captors. This passage also defines the manner in which the Stockholm Syndrome develops in *Leila*. It begins with a destabilized word and from there becomes inescapable. Leila’s barrenness becomes the word that defines her, as a detractor tries to define Nafisi with the word “adulterous,” but the true power of these words comes from the difference of this definition from what the generally accepted definition of “woman” is. For Leila, not being a mother means that she is in some way made un-female, because being a wife and mother define womanhood in her circumstances. Worse, her status as “un-woman” means that she has lost her individuality, and then someone – any other woman whose being is dependent upon this tradition – can come and take her place. The second wife’s name is unimportant, as through this situation neither she nor Leila hold any importance as an individual, but only as a body. Mehrjui ends the film with a great deal of ambiguity regarding Leila and Reza: whether Leila will return, whether she and Reza can rediscover their love. Perhaps most compelling is the ambiguity about Leila’s security in her marriage safe from her mother-in-law – since Reza’s only child is a girl, Reza’s mother may not be satisfied and may start the cycle over again.

Graham’s theories of the Societal Stockholm Syndrome can be easily seen in the internal prison of Mehrjui’s protagonist as well as in the external forces embodied in her mother-in-law which inform and enforce her imprisonment. The horror of the film and the

syndrome become evident through Leila's complicity in the creation of her prison, and the ultimate tragedy occurs when she becomes the agent of her imprisonment. Through the social controls of an oppressive regime, Leila has internalized another's definition of herself and has chosen to make it her prison. Worse, by taking her place in the chain of female-to-female abuse she is accepting her place as her own oppressor and the oppressor of other women. She performs her gender properly according to the regime; however, in doing this she destroys herself. This destruction is, perhaps, the gift of Mehrjui's *Leila*. Dariush Mehrjui demonstrates the paradox of Iranian womanhood and Iranian life by limning the strictures that make it all but impossible to refuse to "dance with the jailer" as well as the import that Islamic feminists insist that refusal is their only option.

## Chapter 2

### By Myself: Iranian Film and Individual Female Identity

In the end, when Cincinnatus is led to the scaffold, and as he lays his head on the scaffold, in preparation for his execution, he repeats the magic mantra: "by myself." This constant reminder of his uniqueness, and his attempts to write, to articulate and create a language different from the one imposed upon him by his jailers, saves him at the last moment, when he takes his head in his hands and walks away towards voices that beckon him from that other world, while the scaffold and all the sham world around him, along with his executioner, disintegrate.

From *Reading Lolita In Tehran*  
by Azar Nafisi

In many Islamic societies, women find themselves disadvantaged because of religiously imposed cultural norms. This is an anomaly because of the long history of Muslim females active in society, politics, and the professions. For instance, in seventh century Arabia, a young man named Muhammad married a successful business woman named Khadija, and she supported him for the remainder of her life. When this man received a revelation from an angel, she comforted him and was the first convert to his new religion. After her death, Muhammad married many wives simultaneously, and these women were considered special, not just by others but by himself<sup>18</sup>. He often referred to his wives when he had a question, and some of them were known to ride into battle with him. Indeed, many of the customs followed today have their base in the example of Muhammad, among them the practices of polygyny and female veiling. Female veiling originated as a way for the prophet's wives to be separate from other women and a manner in which their modesty and

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<sup>18</sup> As I note later in this paragraph, this is part of the argument for polygyny in Islam today; however, in *No God But God*, Reza Aslan argues that this is part of the context of seventh century Arabia, and can also be seen as a way for Muhammad to make political alliances and to spread his new faith. Cf. also Karen Armstrong's *A History of God*.

faithfulness was protected and assured. Later this custom was extended to all Muslim women, likely as a way to emulate Muhammad and his wives. Unfortunately, an act of faith and religious expression has been legislated as a social control in modern-day Iran. This oppressive state leads to a prevalent theme in Islamic women's literature – a crisis of self or identity.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a religiously imposed government and community. In the writings of Aslan and Nafisi, it manages to come across as a hybrid of theocracy and fascism, due in great part to the fear, anger, and paradoxical apathy of the citizens. This combination of tones is also found in the essayists of *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*. In her essay “The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of,” Azar Nafisi asserts “that [after the 1979 revolution] ordinary Iranians, both men and women, inevitably began to feel the presence and intervention of the state in their most private daily affairs” (*Dreams* 6). In addition to the Orwellian reality suddenly omnipresent in Iran, she claims that the regime usurped individual identity and superimposed a personality and religious faith over the public. She dramatically fires on the regime, insisting:

There was also another sense in which home was no longer home, not so much because it destabilized and impelled me to search for new definitions, but mainly because it forced its own definitions upon me, thus turning me into an alien entity. A new regime had established itself in the name of my country, my religion, and my traditions, claiming that the way I looked and acted, what I believed in and desired as a human being, a woman, a writer, and a teacher were essentially alien and did not belong to this home. (2)

What she indicates is an alarming reality in which the most horrifying dystopic fiction has come true – home is no longer home, no longer familiar<sup>19</sup>. Words have destabilized, and the accompanying ideas of home, country, nationalism, patriotism no longer mean what they did before. As such, words such as Muslim, woman, and Muslim woman have been destabilized and redefined according to the regime. Jan Goodwin eloquently identifies the power structure inherent in this brave new world, asserting that

It is clear that the new Islamic revivalists are considerably more radical than their predecessors. As they call for reform to an earlier, more spiritual (and certainly idealized) form of Islam, their rhetoric has more to do with demagoguery than purity of religion. The Islamists recognize what Machiavelli and Plato understood: religion can be used to legitimize power. (8)

Since religion legitimizes power and power legitimizes religion, innocent individuals are in a position of being defined. They have lost the ability to define themselves as “I” and are instead defined by the regime as “you.” This creates a crisis of identity, one in which any slippage between the identity prescribed and the true identity is seen as aberrant. Regardless, individuals remain who do not fit the mold, individuals who still attempt to find and create themselves as individuals outside the norms set forth by writing themselves into existence in the tradition of H el ene Cixous, who asserted the importance of writing to personhood in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa:”

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself

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<sup>19</sup> For more on home/not-home (heimlich and unheimlich) and the accompanying horror, cf. Sigmund Freud’s *The Uncanny* and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*.

into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (257)

An assertion of self is very significant in identity formation and maintenance.

Psychologically, the ability to speak of oneself as separate and distinct, as “I” is crucial to seeing oneself as separate and distinct from the mass of humanity. If one is never I, one never really becomes a person. Much has been written regarding the reassumption of female gaze in Islamic female writing, in order to make a woman subject and not object, but the first step is an assertion of subjecthood in the most basic grammatical sense – one must first become an I, which will then allow for the assumption of female space for that I to inhabit. In this chapter, I shall examine the resumption of the female space intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically through the resumption of the individual “I,” through its most personal and private revelation – the diary. The protagonist in Tahminah Milani’s film *The Hidden Half* uses a diary to introduce herself to her husband. Azar Nafisi’s popular work *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a memoir, much like a diary, and with it she introduces herself and her class to her readers. However, what is most important is most simple – these diaries introduce the women, be it to their husbands, to the world, or simply to themselves, or to a tradition and history of female “I”s of which they are the latest generation.

Tahminah Milani’s film *The Hidden Half* focuses closely on one woman, Fereshteh, and on the events that shaped her as a young woman in Tehran. In the present, she is a married woman with children, a woman her husband considers a feminine ideal, but Fereshteh feels she harbors a dangerous secret about herself<sup>20</sup>. As a young woman, she was politically active in a Communist group. She has a good reason for fear, as many of her comrades have disappeared into Iranian prisons or died. Additionally, she fell in love with a

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<sup>20</sup> Milani’s choice of character name is both ironic and also indicates the pressures inherent on Fereshteh, which means “angel” in Farsi.

handsome older man, publisher Roozbeh Javid, who introduced her to Iranian literary society. Despite age and class differences, as well as the cultural taboos of dating in Iran, Fereshteh pursues the relationship, which ends when she meets Roozbeh Javid's wife. In her flight from Javid and from the Iranian officials searching for her, Fereshteh finds employment caring for an elderly lady whose son is in America. That son later becomes Fereshteh's husband Khosroo, though he does not know the details of her past. Eventually, Fereshteh writes a diary which she reveals this hidden half of herself, though she does not reveal it to her husband. After hearing of the plea of a woman very similar to her, a woman facing death in prison, Fereshteh gives her diary to her husband. The diary is the center of the film – the details of Fereshteh's youth are told in flashbacks. Eventually, she reaches a conclusion in which she asks her husband to look at her life as didactic. Fereshteh acknowledges at the beginning of the film that it is unusual for her to assert herself in this way, but she asserts a strong first person narration throughout. By speaking "I," Fereshteh asserts a personhood for herself and paradoxically for the unnamed female prisoner.

Iranian mythology and religious history speak of many strong female "I"s. The heroines of the post-Revelation world include the aforementioned Khadija, to his later wives, Muhammad was surrounded by many examples of every aspect of femininity<sup>21</sup>. Muhammad lived monogamously with Khadija, but after her death practiced polygyny beyond the precepts of polygyny set forth in the Koran – as God's prophet, he was exempt from the limit of four wives<sup>22</sup>. Among his wives were a Coptic Christian and a Jew. His wives were notable critics and advisors of Muhammad and Koranic interpreters, and some of them rode

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<sup>21</sup> For more detailed biographical information about Muhammad's wives, cf. Aslan's *No God But God*, and Armstrong's *A History of God*.

<sup>22</sup> Because of the different alphabets, there is no standard English spelling for Islam's holy text. I will use the spelling "Koran" throughout; however, quoted material I use may contain the alternate spelling Quran.

with him into battle. His famous (or infamous) wife Aisha worked very hard after his death to determine the way Islam would proceed, and it is out of the disagreement over leadership in which she was so active that the division between Shi'ite and Sunni Islam grew. A powerful mythical woman predates these ancient modern Muslim women, one who was alive because she was an imaginative storyteller and a courageous woman. The narrator and overarching protagonist of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade, predates Muhammad's wives. In the fantastic set of tales that make up the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the most amazing is the frame story of the storyteller herself, Scheherazade. In ancient Iran, the king Shahryar finds that his wife had been unfaithful and had her executed. In his rage and hurt, he marries young virgins and executes them the morning after, until only two women of marriageable age remain – Scheherazade and her sister. Scheherazade volunteers to marry the king, and through her own creativity finds a way to halt the slaughter of women. She told fantastic tales to her husband in order to avoid the executioner. Though she may not have written herself into being per se, she is only alive because of her wit, her intelligence, and her stories. Indeed, so great is her talent that she is able to tell her husband rather controversial stories, such as a tale in which a woman disguises herself as her missing king-husband and rules a country until her death. This most powerful mythical storytelling woman, Scheherazade, saves her own life, as well as the lives of other women by telling stories for one thousand and one nights until she manages to change her husband's mind about women, and then change the law of the land. Scheherazade used words to create a safe space for her to inhabit, a space where she is able to speak freely. In her study of the Stockholm Syndrome experienced at a societal level, Dee Graham claims that finding or creating space is intrinsic to the healing of the oppressed,

stating that

Claiming space is a basic method for prospering used by oppressed groups.

Individuals dream of owning their own houses or of owning land. Groups dream of building their own church or meeting hall. And these dreams sustain hope, lead to plans, guide actions, and sometimes become realities<sup>23</sup>. (250)

Instead of creating physical space, Scheherazade created intellectual space, which in turn became physical space. She maintained control of her own mind, and later used that mind and her creativity through her storytelling to reclaim physical space, her physical body. In this manner, Iranian writers who reclaim intellectual space are taking the first step to reclaiming their physical space. They are reclaiming intellectual, emotional, and psychological space for themselves, following in the tradition of Scheherazade and spinning tales to keep themselves alive.

Scheherazade's stories are fascinating, but the overarching story, her story is what is most interesting; likewise, the stories told in *The Hidden Half* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* pale beside the ultimate story of their writers. Nafisi's text is many things, and its many facets make it all the more compelling. Literary, social, and political criticism combine with autobiography to create a many-layered work which mirrors the many facets of fiction. As a memoir, it is an important work because it is a proclamation of self which demonstrates what could have been and very nearly was an obliteration of self. She writes: "I felt light and fictional, as if I were walking on air, as if I had been written into being and then erased in one quick swipe" (*Lolita* 167). By writing her own memoir, reclaiming her "I," Nafisi defies

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<sup>23</sup> I discuss Graham's book, *Loving To Survive: Sexual Terror, Men's Violence, And Women's Lives*, in detail in chapter 1. Graham studies the "normal" performance of gender and claims that this is due to female fear and stress and male power, and control, not biological or physiological differences between the sexes. She calls this theory the Societal Stockholm Syndrome.

those who wrote her and instead writes herself. She describes the circumstances of the 1979 revolution from both an intellectual and personal point of view, limning the illogical and incomprehensible events and circumstances with her feelings about the matter. As a university professor in Iran, teaching English and American literature, she struggled with the insubordination of and disrespect from her male students, one in particular; however, she is careful to separate the actions of individuals from the actions of the regime. When she describes her discussion with the male student, she places little blame on the student and instead places it on the circumstances, insisting that “the more irrelevant I became, the more powerful he became, and slowly and imperceptibly our roles reversed” (Nafisi *Lolita* 103). In this situation, the teacher found herself subordinate to her student because of a concept of gender imbedded in the Koranic impress of cultural mores, a situation which seems ludicrous in the United States. What is even more unbelievable is the depth of the identity crisis in which Nafisi found herself. Despite her happy marriage, her joy in her children, and her professional success, the regime in Iran nearly succeeded in reducing her to nothing. By taking away her professional confidence and later her position as a female professor, the regime created sufficient instability within her to place strain on her family, which in turn placed more strain on her professionally. Because her individuality was being erased by her new definition as a Muslim woman, she often wondered if she was becoming “irrelevant” (169). Nafisi gives words to this lowest point by telling her readers how she questioned and doubted herself, asking the plaintive question: “Do I exist?” (168). With this question, she gives credence to a regime that would have erased her by doubting her very being.

Nafisi’s memoir, published years later, allows for a certain distance from the events told, events which were certainly traumatic at the time. This temporal distance, coupled with

the geographic distance afforded by her residence in the United States, allows for a healing to take place, a re-assumption of herself as whole. Her memories of that revolutionary time take on a depth of meaning that the experience may not have held when lived because of underlying fear:

A stern ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher-king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and a people and to re-create us in his own myopic vision. So he had formulated an ideal of me as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, act and in short live according to the ideal. Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance but an existential one. No, I could tell Mr. Bahri, it was not that piece of cloth that I rejected, it was the transformation being imposed on me that made me look in the mirror and hate the stranger I had become. (165)

Nafisi claims an “unselfing” by the regime in this excerpt, an obliteration of “Azar Nafisi” by the standard Iranian Muslim woman created by the regime and placed over every woman regardless of fit. Her recognition of herself as a stranger, her identification of her resistance as “existential,” makes the writing of her memoir all the more important, as writing her self, writing “I,” mean existing at all in this instance.

There is a recurrence of the diary or memoir form in Islamic women’s writing which is an interesting way to straddle the sharply divided public and private worlds in many Islamic countries. A diary is a private document, a way to express one’s thoughts and ideas in a forum which is normally only for the self; however, simply by arranging one’s thoughts and ideas into a written document makes the possibility of another’s reading it all the more likely. Writing a diary is always an act of desiring to be read by others, an act of desiring

publication and readership on a personal level, because if one truly desires privacy and secrecy, one would not create a document that could be found. In Islamic countries where women are often enshrouded in the “private” sphere, a diary is a safe step toward the outside world, toward an area of free circulation, and a bold movement toward being known. A diary limns the private and the public spheres. As a “veiled” text, a diary offers a layer between a writer and the outside world while at the same time making that writer exposed and vulnerable. The diary is also a reflection on the state of the oppressed writer, who must step away from her own art in order to create it. It is as though they tell one story in order to tell another. Additionally, a diary within the confines of a fictional work, such as Tahmineh Milani’s *The Hidden Half* allows for a modicum of security by allowing the author or filmmaker to take another step from the immediacy of her text. Writing feminist manifestos would be dangerous and so writing fiction has been a way for Islamic feminists living in Islamic countries to express their ideas<sup>24</sup>. A diary within that fiction allows for a greater degree of separation from the work, as now the ideas and judgments are expressed by a character within the work and not the author. This allows for the author to be separated from the narrator in a situation which is resonant of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

If being an “I” defines a woman as the most dangerous of assertive females in Islamic tradition, then that tradition is defied simply because of the utilization of the first-person narrative or diary form. Within the realm of *Hidden Half*, the assertion of this I is the act which is both ultimately freeing and ultimately redemptive for the female protagonist. In *The Hidden Half*, Fereshteh’s husband uses the term “saar beh rah,” “a . . . term indicating that

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<sup>24</sup> In an instance in which life imitates art, Tahmineh Milani was imprisoned by the Iranian government after the release of *The Hidden Half* despite its originally being allowed by Iran’s censors. She was accused of being a threat to national security, a capital offense. She was later freed after pressure from the international cinematic community and the citizens of Iran, where many consider her their most popular filmmaker. President Ahmadinejad spoke on her behalf.

she is unmanageable and stands beyond the pale of acceptable norms of female conduct” to define the female prisoner he is going to interview<sup>25</sup> (Scullion 6). Though he uses the term to contrast the “bad” woman against his angel wife, Fereshteh’s husband has also unwittingly applied it to her. By standing outside of the norms imposed upon her, Fereshteh begins to define her own norms, to define what acceptable behavior is both for themselves and for their treatment by those around them; but this defiance she stands outside the texts as well as within. Simply by being written and filmed, Milani has created an unmistakably feminist text within a feminist text – her main character asserts an individual “I” as the creator asserts a collective “I.”

Milani’s film seems to parallel Nafisi’s text not only with her use of a diary form, but also with her allusions to Western works and her assertion to individual rights. Milani leans heavily on a film that demonstrated the negative effects of an oppressive regime on the happiness of individuals, *Doctor Zhivago*, with its breathless sighs and searching looks and intrusive theme music. Individual choices are stifled in both films, but Milani chooses not to focus on what is lost, but what is to be gained from the experience, focusing on the lesson against judgment, a lesson in which circumstances and context come into play. No one rule works for everyone, an idea much against the grain of the totalitarian regime in Iran. Fereshteh begins to discover this as a young girl working in her communist group, and later hears it from the lips of her brooding hero, Roozbeh Javid: “No two lives are similar. And there isn’t any specific formula for love and life to be applied equally to all” (Milani). This clear assertion of individuality over the collective is at the heart of *The Hidden Half*, as the crux of the difference between the regime’s view of an individual and the individual’s self-view. The problematics of judgment come into play with this identity crisis, as one

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<sup>25</sup> Anglicized Farsi rendered by Rosemarie Scullion.

individual cannot know another, cannot judge another, without true knowledge of the person. Fereshteh judges Roozbeh Javid quickly, only discovering that she may not have had all the information at the end of the film when he finds her and admonishes her for her hasty judgment:

But dear lady, you judged too soon and you weren't a good judge. You only listened to the complainant. The accused never had the opportunity to defend himself. The things you were told weren't the entire truth. But we can't do anything now. That was our fate, good-bye. (Milani)

Both simple and fatalistic, Javid's farewell functions as the last piece of the education Fereshteh's turbulent life affords her before she hides her diary in her husband's suitcase, placing everything else that she had been through in a context which allowed a great compassion and wisdom to be born in her. This most important message in Milani's film is that it is easy to judge, but to be just, we must hold off judgment until we have heard both sides. This lesson in egalitarianism originates in an instance when the judge is a woman, and is later accepted and practiced by her husband<sup>26</sup>. In her film, Milani asserts a right to counterargument, to defense, to the idea that there is more than one version of the same tale. Out of this encounter with her former love, Fereshteh draws not only the insight but the courage to reveal those facets of her life which may seem unfavorable to her husband, and to place them within a context of forgiveness, mercy, and love, saying:

Think. Think well. If you didn't know the whole story and someone told you that your wife had been with a man she loved twenty years ago, what would you think?

You always called me a good and honest woman. My darling, I owe all this goodness

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps one of the more alarming instances in Milani's film occurs early, when Khosro and Fereshteh are discussing the unnamed prisoner's case, and Khosro says it is "not serious." Clearly not to him; however, the prisoner is facing execution, so she might consider her case very serious.

to my past. The period that I passed, with all its difficulties, helped me to know life deeply, not superficially. If I wrote all this for you, it was so you could help a woman whom you believe isn't 'easy.' Maybe she was convicted by unfair societal rules, and not for a real crime. She could have been me, Zohreh, or Farkhondeh. I beg you to go and listen to her words, to all of her words.

By asking her husband to hear the prisoner, Fereshteh asks him to not jump to conclusions and instead of hear the female side, an act which has more ramifications than are originally evident. By hearing the female prisoner's story, Khosro acknowledges her uniqueness and chooses to disregard the definition of her that the regime has superimposed. Furthermore, Khosro allows the prisoner to place her story into a context, to tell the story of her whole life, which again shows a great deal of respect for the individual. The implications of Milani's emphasis on context are as controversial as her emphasis on egalitarianism and feminism – if a story is in context, then the actions of an individual may have a cause, may be understandable and defensible.

In addition to its messages concerning independent thinking and fair judgment, Milani's film presents many conflicting and controversial views, most of which come from the lips of the others around the impressionable young Fereshteh. This constructs a plurality within the film text, a conversation which Milani shows her viewers in order to underline the importance of a dialogue, of argument and counter-argument. When we first see him, Roozbeh Javid is engaged with a group of intellectuals discussing society, politics, and individual rights. The leader of the communist group Fereshteh joined at university, Nasrin, offers the official advice on romantic love; and through Javid, Fereshteh makes the acquaintance of Ms. Pahlevan, an intellectual whose writings are published by Mr. Javid and

who is apparently a political activist who has spent time in prison for her beliefs. Within the communist group, time in prison is seen as a badge of honor, conferring power and wisdom which may not have been earned, upon the individual. By showing the assumption of status, however arbitrary, within the confines of a communist group, Milani reveals the inevitability of stratification, be it social, political, or sexual (an idea that comes from Fereshteh herself – she tells her group that she wrote an article about this and asked to have it published). Milani raises the question of individual identity within regimes or groups that insist on everybody being the same by looking at the communist group as a microcosm compared to the macrocosmic Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, her film is a visual representation of an assignment Azar Nafisi gave to her private class, in which she asked them to write about themselves. Dr. Nafisi discovers that they had an unusual difficulty with the assignment: “implicit in almost all their descriptions was the way they saw themselves in the context of an outside reality that prevented them from defining themselves clearly and separately” (*Lolita* 75-6). Because of the oppressive regime, the young women in Dr. Nafisi’s private class are unable to see themselves as individuals, as separate and distinct from the mass group of “Muslim women” as defined by Muslim leaders. This inability to see themselves as individuals leads to a crisis of identity in which Fereshteh becomes an empty page, able to be defined by anyone. Eventually Fereshteh fills her own pages with herself, within the pages of her diary.

The diary at the heart of *The Hidden Half* creates a distance within which a story is told. Like *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Hidden Half* functions as a frame story; however, there is a difference in the narration. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade tells stories to her husband. In *The Hidden Half*, Fereshteh tells only one story

to her husband, and it is not told with her voice but with her writing, so he acts as an agent of her narration. Fereshteh places her diary in her husband's suitcase before he travels to interrogate a female political prisoner. He finds the diary in his hotel room the night before the interview, and spends the evening reading his wife's account of her life. In Fereshteh's diary, the story of the 1979 Iranian Revolution is told in flashbacks from her perspective as a young university student and activist at the time. The purpose of the diary has never been for it to remain a private document – always the story is intended for a particular person (in this case Khosro), always is it intended for that story to be read. In her note to her husband (the “preface” to her diary) Fereshteh says

It's been a long time that I've wanted to give you this notebook, but I never found it necessary . . . . I should have talked to you. I should have told you many things about my real self. Maybe telling you will help this woman who is awaiting her death. Maybe her death would be the result of a wrong decision. I know I'm taking a risk by recounting these memories, but dear, in my age, one has the right to be herself and I will willingly pay the price. (Milani)

In this sense, Fereshteh writes not only to assert her “I” privately, for the diary is written with a strong first person and not the self-removed “one,” but she writes to assert herself, her true self, to her husband. Additionally, she acts as an agent for the nameless female prisoner and by extension all other women by acknowledging the connection she has with all the other Iranian women through their oppression. Fereshteh rejects the persona imposed by outside forces and forms her own self, and maintains and asserts that true self by writing – essentially, she writes herself into existence. In *The Hidden Half*, Fereshteh's “ideal reader,” her husband, does view her diary. Though we do not see his reaction to his wife, nor do we

see the impact her revelation has on their relationship, it is clear that Fereshteh's husband has changed the way he views women, particularly those he would ordinarily dismiss.

Furthermore, he allows a "bad" woman, the formerly easily judged prisoner, to have a voice at the end, which is a victory not only for Fereshteh but for all Iranian women.

In *The Hidden Half*, there is a change or shift in the reader of the diary within the story as opposed to a change in the writer of the diary, which functions both within the text as well as outside of it. Milani exposes an oppressive regime and has her main character ask her husband to listen without prejudice, which is a request for the world outside the film as well as inside it. Fereshteh's diary not only asserts an identity, but corrects the misassumptions her husband had while defending those who had idealistically worked to improve Iran in 1979 and now find themselves punished. We know that she has successfully influenced her husband, as in the last scene he asks the prisoner to tell her story, and patiently listens as she begins: "I have no happy childhood memory . . ." (Milani). This is the same phrase with which Fereshteh began her diary; and it is in this vein of inauspicious beginnings and of connection with a collective female identity that confirms her status as everywoman. This resonates with the concept of collective female authorship originating with Scheherazade. The many faces of female identity become compiled and overlap in their shared oppression. There is a mosaic of women's identity created and being created in this instance and the others, a mosaic by which both an individual and collective identity is asserted, reasserted, and nuanced. Fereshteh is herself, and yet she is allied and aligned with the unnamed prisoner (who may be Nasrin, though it is not implicit in the film), with nearly every other Muslim woman, and yet remains separate and distinct.

Nafisi's text and Milani's film show the distinct possibility of the victimization of

women through legislated religious constraints, though this kind of oppression is neither confined to nor condoned by the tenets of Islam. In these works, Islamic identity is shown as written on the female body. A western face is given to this phenomenon (literally) by Irshad Manji, on the cover of her book *The Trouble With Islam*. Because she was raised in Canada, Manji felt that she could ask questions about Islam. Despite her Western residence and her public school education, Manji found that questions in her *madressa* (Muslim school) were unwelcome, and that her gender determined her status within the Canadian Muslim community. Manji faces criticism because of her emphasis on logical debate and an honest look at unfavorable aspects of Islam which has resulted in a death threat posted on [www.ummah.com](http://www.ummah.com). Manji's statement "the trouble with Islam is that lives are small and lies are big" while provocative, is non-gendered; however, the equally provocative cover of her book clearly makes a statement about female silence and agency (3). The cover of the US version of Manji's book is a close-up photograph of her face, with her mouth covered by a white band in which the title, *The Trouble With Islam*, is written. It can be seen as a pictorial representation of exactly what the problem with Islam is, as can the cover of Nafisi's text – two young girls in hijab, with their eyes lowered, unable to appropriate space and gaze. The two covers seem vastly different – one shows two women traditionally dressed in chadors, the other shows a Western woman with wild hair – they are both covers that suggest silencing and forced passivity. This concept is in sharp contrast to the content of the two books, in which both Manji and Nafisi suggest solutions to the problem of oppression, so they are neither silent nor passive. In her book, Manji suggests that the way to create a space for Islamic women is through microloans which will enable them to become self-sufficient, which will then lead to independence. Nafisi maintains that education and literacy will be

powerful forces which can break the regime and empower women. Perhaps both of these ideas ought to become the reality for Iranian women, but in order for either to be effective, these women must realize their own personal freedom. In Milani's film, this idea is vocalized by Roozbeh Javid, who notes: "In my opinion, freedom is when a person, while considering others' rights, can call into question, can make mistakes, can speak his mind, and can say NO, whether it be to political, religious, artistic, or literary authorities." The power that accompanies this sort of freedom is that which can emancipate Iranian women from the physical, mental, and emotional prisons in which they all too often find themselves. However, freedom and wisdom are not mutually exclusive – one must understand the necessity and responsibility of this freedom in order to exercise it; yet one must exercise a certain freedom in order to gain the wisdom necessary.

Comparing the diary imbedded in *The Hidden Half* with Azar Nafisi's diary-form work, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir In Books*, it is clear that Nafisi has a greater degree of freedom in acknowledging her own thoughts and ideas, which is likely a result of her situation as a writer in the United States. Other Muslim female writers living in western countries, Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands and Irshad Manji in Canada enjoy a similar freedom; however, I do not mean to imply that these women are totally free from the pressures also suffered by their Eastern sisters. Hirsi Ali and Manji have received death threats for their work as Muslim feminists, and Hirsi Ali's collaborator on the film *Submission*, Theo van Gogh, was gunned down in an Amsterdam street November 2, 2004<sup>27</sup>. However, these women do have a right to freedom of speech within the western countries in which they live, a right which the government and the police must protect. Words allow for

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<sup>27</sup> The film was released in 2004, and was about Muslim women speaking about their circumstances and their faith. The Arabic word "islam" for which the faith is named means submission.

freedom, as the assumption of language outside the home in many respects equals an assumption of personal freedom and an assertion of personal identity. All too often, Muslim women have found themselves in the unfortunate position of being written, but as they invoke the myth of Scheherazade, they begin to write themselves free. In reclaiming intellectual space and creating a world in which they can envision a better reality for themselves, they create hope and possibility – the possibility that they can bring about change outside the pages of the book. Irshad Manji fosters this hope and possibility in her book, where she discusses Islamic reform, and makes a bold statement regarding independent thinking: “At this stage, reform isn’t about telling ordinary Muslims what not to think, but giving Islam’s 1 billion Muslims permission to think. Since the Koran is a bundle of contradictions, at least when it comes to women, we have every reason to think” (36). With this statement, Manji creates an opening for a conversation. Her statement agrees with the themes of Milani’s film, and enters into the same conversation as Milani, Hirsi Ali, and Nafisi. Manji issues an invitation and a call to arms (or words) which she then defines by making a claim to *ijtihad*, an “Islamic legal term meaning “independent reasoning” as opposed to *taqlid* (imitation) . . . . It is considered a required religious duty for those qualified to perform it (Esposito 134). Esposito’s definition places requirements (only by certain people, must not counter the Koran or Islamic tradition) on the performance and function of *ijtihad* which seem to counter its definition as “independent reasoning.”

Many Muslims who call for a reform to their faith invoke the idea of *ijtihad* and ask for it to be renewed. Irshad Manji considers *ijtihad* a right and a duty of every Muslim, which she defines according to an anonymous Muslim as ““The Islamic tradition of independent reasoning, which he claimed allowed every Muslim, female or male, straight or

gay, old or young, to update his or her religious practice in light of contemporary circumstances” (50). Fereshteh questions her society and the system of oppression in which she must live by asking her husband not to prejudge another woman, because that woman’s circumstances are so similar to her own. Fereshteh notes: “Maybe she was convicted by unfair societal rules, and not for a real crime. She could have been me” (Milani). It is from this statement that Fereshteh has engaged in *ijtihad*, and is asking her husband to do the same; likewise, Milani is asking her viewers to engage in *ijtihad*, a shocking and punishable idea in Islamic societies where women are at times discouraged from reading and writing and questioning rules. She does this through example, by pushing her characters to *ijtihad*, which is uncommon. In Shi’ah Islam, most people are discouraged from this practice. In his study of the history and evolution of Islam, Reza Aslan notes:

There are now so many mujtahids in the Shi’ite world that only those who have attained the very highest level of scholarship and who can boast the greatest number of disciples are still allowed to practice *ijtihad*<sup>28</sup>. At the top of this order of mujtahids are the ayatollahs (the title means ‘the sign of God’), whose decisions are binding on their disciples. (*No God* 185)

Tahminah Milani’s controversial film seems innocent by American standards, but since Milani has used history to question oppression – and she has done it not only by asserting a feminist stance, but also by asking what happened to the idealistic principles of the 1979 revolution. Through flashbacks which show young university students articulating their ideas and feelings, we see the hope of Iranians during a time of unprecedented freedom – hope for a better life for all Iranians, at a time when a young girl at university might believe

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<sup>28</sup> Mujtahid: “One who exercises independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in the interpretation of Islamic law. Qualifications include training in recognized schools of Islamic law and extensive knowledge of the Quran and hadith” (Esposito 214).

that she could not only change her world, but could have a voice in policy. By invoking the principles of *ijtihad* with a revisionist view of Iranian history told with a female voice, Milani seems to express a hope for independent thinking and for a female voice to be heard in oppressive regimes. Furthermore, Milani's film functions to validate the views, i.e., the interpretations, of an individual, which Reza Aslan validates in a religious context, stating that "religion is, by definition, interpretation; and by definition, all interpretations are valid" (*No God* xxvii). Milani uses her female protagonist to express an interpretation of what the concept of "woman," particularly "Muslim woman," is in Islamic countries and what both the concept and the reality could and ought to be. Milani joins Nafisi, Hirsi Ali, and Manji in envisioning the future of the Muslim woman by stating not only what is happening, but what should be – but this endeavor is only half of the necessary work to procure a better reality for Muslim women.

The dedicated students and teacher in Nafisi's text, Manji's curious rebel, and Hirsi Ali's politician/artist set themselves against and with the sad wives and disillusioned women in *The Hidden Half* to have their say. Religious scholar Karen Armstrong notes that "the Koran teaches that all religious people have a duty to work for a just and equal society . . ." and it is in this vein that Iranian feminists assert themselves verbally (155). For these characters, writers, teachers, filmmakers, and countless others, writing oneself is a daily exercise against obliteration and invisibility. Nothing is more important than reading and listening to their words, to all of their words, and accepting their identity as it is expressed. In her memoir, another diary written by a Muslim woman, Azar Nafisi quotes one of her former students, to whom she has given the alias Manna for protection:

Five years have passed since the time the story began in a cloud-lit room where we

read *Madame Bovary* and had chocolate from a wine-red dish on Thursday mornings. Hardly anything has changed in the nonstop sameness of our everyday life. But somewhere else I have changed. Each morning with the rising of the routine sun as I wake up and put on my veil before the mirror to go out and become part of what is called reality, I know of another “I” that has become naked on the pages of a book: in a fictional world, I have become fixed like a Rodin statue. And so I will remain as long as you keep me in your eyes, dear readers. (*Lolita* 343)

Within these pages, within the pages of a book, within the world of a film, there is a freedom to speak; however, it remains a closed world unless the reader can make a leap into the depths of what it means to be human, to tie the threads of these scattered voices together into a mosaic that can allow each woman to speak. Scheherazade’s talent was so great that her audience, her husband, made this leap, and listened as she spun tales containing taboos concerning male and female relationships and power. He listened as she made a thief sympathetic, made magic real. In the end, she created her own reality. In this tradition, Milani’s fictional Fereshteh and Nafisi’s students seek to create their own reality, as the writers (or biographers) of these women join Manji, and Hirsi Ali and seek to bring about their own version of reality. They write themselves into existence in the best sense of Cixous’s idea; however, the writing is not the end but rather a means to an end. Writing begins the conversation in which the reader must then partake. As Nafisi’s *Manna* reminds the readers, this discussion suggests that to keep these women in our eyes is to keep them alive. The responsibility is up to the reader of these words to protect the integrity and courage of the writer’s imperative. Keeping these women in our eyes is to recognize the integrity of their writing, to honor the ideas of plurality that they espouse, and to support their

courage and vulnerability as they speak in the face of opposition.

## Chapter 3

### All The Dreams and Slogans Were Coming True: Fiction, Reality, and the Iranian Female Writer

In those days we were all passerby in the crowded streets of a metropolitan city, faces buried deep in our collars, preoccupied with our own problems. I felt a certain distance from most of my students. When in the States we had shouted Death to this or that, those deaths seemed to be more symbolic, more abstract, as if we were encouraged by the impossibility of our slogans to insist upon them even more. But in Tehran in 1979, these slogans were turning into reality with macabre precision: I felt helpless: all the dreams and slogans were coming true, and there was no escaping them.

From *Reading Lolita In Tehran*  
by Azar Nafisi

When reality becomes oppressive, fiction often becomes a place of resistance. When the truth cannot be clearly stated, literature becomes a way to speak the truth under the cover of fiction. In *Reading Lolita In Tehran*, Azar Nafisi uses fictional works to speak to her students about the oppression under which they all live, and to demonstrate the ways in which freedom can be sought. Through her use of Western novels, Nafisi teaches alternative realities and shows her students a way to intellectual and emotional freedom. Nafisi's text demonstrates that the most important tool in a struggle for human rights is words. As a professor of literature, she often ascribes great power to literary works. This power is multiplied by her use of Western novels to limn the political and social tensions both within Iran at the time of the revolution as well as internationally. She makes her point in this instance using F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. She claims:

What we in Iran had in common with [F. Scott] Fitzgerald was this dream that became our obsession and took over our reality, this terrible, beautiful dream, impossible in its actualization, for which any amount of violence might be justified or

forgiven. This was what we had in common though we were not aware of it then . . . .  
When I left the class that day, I did not tell them what I myself was just beginning to discover: how similar our fate was becoming to Gatsby's. He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future. Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream" (*Lolita* 144).

What Nafisi is describing is a surreal reality in which a fiction has become reality. An imam had a dream of a perfect society, and he wrote this vision over the existing reality after the 1979 revolution. His words wove into a story which became the reality for life in Iran. As I note in chapter one, ideas and words are the key to the success of Iranian Feminism, as the right to intellectual freedom is fundamental to the conception of self and personhood, as well as to the confidence necessary in order to break a silence, to make a place for oneself intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Shahrnush Parsipur uses this precedent in which words become instruments of massive change to engage female resistance to male domination and to establish a new reality by writing it.

Parsipur's vision of an ideal situation is not written realistically – instead, her story is both fantastic and practical. Living under an oppressive regime that censors to a level that seems ridiculous in the US, Iranian writers frequently turn to dreamlike tales<sup>29</sup>. This trend toward magical realism serves a double purpose, not only invoking Scheherazade as a teller of fairy tales which make a point about current affairs, but also rendering the text subversive

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<sup>29</sup> Nafisi notes on pp. 24-5 of *Reading Lolita In Tehran* that the film censor in Iran for years was nearly blind.

by hiding the true message under a layer of fantasy<sup>30</sup>. Shahnush Parsipur's dreamlike *Women Without Men*, with its magical realism and creation of a female utopia was banned in Iran due to its controversial subject matter. Parsipur openly discusses female sexuality, taking a critical stance on the importance of female virginity and issues of male dominance and oppression. By using magical realism, Parsipur is able to focus attention on the issues she wishes to address, rather than on everyday realities which would cloud the issue and remove attention from the thrust of her argument. Azar Nafisi notes that the realistic novel never really caught on in Iran (*Lolita* 187). From this statement, one might draw the conclusion that reality in Iran is something from which to escape. Iranian female writers take a page from Scheherazade, a mythical Iranian figure who constructed an identity for herself and secured freedom from an oppressive and murderous regime for herself and other women by creating stories. In this chapter, I look at the ways Parsipur uses fantasy to criticize the reality of oppression, and has used writing as a political act<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, I argue that literature functions as political criticism by advocating education and literacy as key components to facilitate and foster independent thinking and the rejection of archaic traditions and superstitions.

Parsipur's novel *Women Without Men* is fantasy grounded in reality, which is classically magical realism. Each of the five women in the text becomes dissatisfied with her reality and moves into a safe place, a garden, where their fantasies can come true. These

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<sup>30</sup> Scheherazade is both a legend and a fabulist. She serves as a writer of fairy tales, which current literary research validates as important texts in understanding fears and warnings, as well as a female storyteller whose talent and intelligence saved her life. Because of these two facets, she is essentially a character created from and by magical realism – one who is fantastic and realistic at the same time.

<sup>31</sup> Parsipur does not consider herself political. In his afterword to *Women Without Men*, Persis M. Karim notes that she “does not see herself as a political activist and eschews any association with organized political movements . . . Parsipur's desire not to be labeled with any particular political party or movement points to her decision to distinguish herself from earlier literary movements that were decidedly politically ‘committed’ . . . Parsipur's writing, ironically, has a very real political effect among her readers and has led to her own politicizing as a writer” (141-2).

fantasies are a manifestation of their inner realities or their secret desires. For instance, one woman, Mahdokht wishes to become a tree. She is dissatisfied with her living situation in which she lives with her brother and his annoying children, and saddened by the loss of love and marriage because of the rules of conduct determining suitable female behavior have prevented her from accepting a date. To remove herself from this situation, Mahdokht plants herself in the corner of her brother's garden, and becomes a human tree. Ashamed of the human tree, her brother sells the garden to a widow, Mrs. Farrokhlāqa Sadraldivan Golchehreh, who thinks the woman-tree in the garden is an interesting asset. Farrokhlāqa had accidentally killed her husband after a long marriage in which her husband desired only to control her, not to know her<sup>32</sup>. The day she purchases the garden in Karaj, she finds herself offering refuge to three women who arrive on her doorstep. Two of the women, Munis and Faizeh, seek refuge after having been raped on the road. The third, Zarrinkolah, is a former prostitute who experienced a religious epiphany and left the brothel. Each of these women begins a life overdetermined by men, and then seeks to design her own destiny. These five women come to the garden in Karaj and leave it having learned how to navigate an egalitarian life with men. Parsipur's creation of this women's space is important because the all-female space allows them to discover and realize their own desires. The reclamation of female space, whether physical, intellectual, or emotional is key to the success of Iranian feminism and for the improvement of the conditions in which Iranian women live.

Parsipur does not restrict the need for female space and female agency to age, though she focuses on the needs of adult women and not girls in Iran. The women in Parsipur's

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<sup>32</sup> Farrokhlāqa killed her husband by hitting him in the stomach because she was afraid of his sudden kindness to her. She was so used to his anger and cruelty that she lashed out at his first gentle word. Parsipur writes: "There was no derision in his eyes; he was looking at her kindly. Farrokhlāqa was frightened. She was certain that he was planning something. She thought, what if he kills me?" (69)

novel range in age from eighteen to fifty-one, which gives her a great deal to work with in terms of showcasing adult female life and sexuality. The youngest is only named as the “daughter of” a man, and is considered the ideal wife because of her youth as well as her looks and comportment. Speaking to his mother, who claims the woman is too young for her forty-year-old son, he insists, “I must marry a girl younger than twenty. Also, it’s obvious from her appearance that she won’t be unchaste” (Parsipur 42). Parsipur uses Amir’s assurance of her chastity to produce an ironic situation in which the girl’s virginity is anything but certain; nine pages later, Munis reveals that the girl had been pregnant and aborted the baby the year before. This is an example of Parsipur’s contrasting appearance with reality, indicating the tensions inherent in Iran between these oppositions. The girl’s appearance indicates that she is the ideal Iranian woman. As Amir says to his mother:

“I will marry the daughter of Hajj Mohammed Sorkchehreh. She’s eighteen years old, very beautiful, soft and quiet, modest, shy, kind, diligent, hard-working, dignified, chaste, elegant, and neat. She wears a chador, always looks down when she’s in the street, and blushes constantly.” (41)

Amir bases his choice of a wife on outward appearance, without considering that appearances can be (and in this case, are) deceiving. In his afterword to Parsipur’s novel, Persis M. Karim comments on this passage, claiming “this description is a litany of characteristics that compose the timeless definition of an ‘ideal’ Iranian woman; chaste, modest, and silent. Parsipur’s use of such a description is of course ironic and points to the prison that this silence and chastity creates for all women” (159). While this feminine ideal is limiting for women to whom it is ascribed as well as those it is not, it is likewise limiting for the men involved. The manner in which an ideal woman is chosen is based on deception and an

emphasis on an ideal which is either false or fleeting. Parsipur contests the emphasis on the presence or absence of a hymen in determining a woman's worth, as well as the assumption that socially acceptable modest behavior is somehow tied to the presence of this membrane, by subverting Amir's assumptions. Parsipur also undercuts the social norms of this situation through an example of female solidarity. Normally, a new bride found lacking a hymen would be returned to her father's home in disgrace, where she would be punished or perhaps killed. But for Amir, this is not an option. His sister Munis, who reveals the truth about his bride, orders him to stay with her, threatening: "if you harm her I'll punish you in a way you'll never forget" (Parsipur 52). In addition to deemphasizing female virginity, Parsipur uses this instance to rethink the manner in which Iranian women deal with each other. Despite her dislike of the girl and the marriage, Munis tries to protect her. This functions as another example in which female agency becomes a means of resistance, not only to male domination but to harmful patterns of thought and female-to-female abuse that abusive patriarchy can engender<sup>33</sup>.

As a result of this male domination, Parsipur weaves falsehoods and deceptions throughout the text as one of its major themes. She focuses on a set of lies told to women by women: lies and fictions regarding their own bodies. Munis has been told that virginity was a "curtain," easily damaged or torn; Faizeh corrects her, claiming that virginity is "a hole. It's narrow, and then it becomes wide" (26). Given the realities of female anatomy, both definitions of female virginity are in some way correct, Faizeh's slightly more so; however, Karim comes closest to the absolute reality of the concept of female virginity in Iran by identifying it as a prison (159). In *The Caged Virgin*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali agrees with Karim's

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<sup>33</sup> This hearkens to the Societal Stockholm Syndrome discussed in chapter one, in which women act as agents of their own or other women's oppression.

metaphor, and calls the emphasis on female virginity a “cage.” She argues that this emphasis on female virginity, and the measures taken to ensure it, is a major cause of the stagnancy of Muslim society. According to Hirsi Ali, “the ‘virgins’ cage’ has consequences for women, but also for men and children. She insists that “the virgins’ cage is, in fact, a double cage. Women and girls are locked up in the inner cage, but surrounding this is a larger cage in which the entire Islamic culture has been imprisoned<sup>34</sup>” (Hirsi Ali 26). An emphasis on female virginity is part of the deception perpetrated by men as a control. The virgins’ cage only exists because of the rules of society which deem it important, and this emphasis seems ludicrous, because as Hirsi Ali notes, a man can only be assured of his wife’s virginity once. Every day thereafter he can suspect her of adultery, a crime punishable by death (24). In Islamic countries, female sexuality is frequently a matter of life and death, and always a matter of honor and control. It is ironic that women, who are powerless socially and politically (and disadvantaged physically) are considered the custodians of sexual morality. In her novel, *Parsipur* limns the two sides of the issue of blame for sexual transgressions by taking it out of a human context; however, the reality for Islamic women is that they are considered guilty of any sexual misconduct.

Muslim women are not only the keepers of family honor, but are held responsible by the dominant males for any sexual transgressions, including rape<sup>35</sup>. In *Parsipur*’s novel, two women are raped. Neither is punished for the violation, and instead there is an instance of some sort of divine judgment for the rapists – they die in a car accident when their car hits a

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<sup>34</sup> Hirsi Ali continues, “caging women to guard their virginity leads not only to frustration and violence for the individuals directly involved, but also socioeconomic backwardness for the entire community. These caged women actually exert a harmful influence on children, especially young boys. Since most women in the Islamic world are excluded from education, and are purposely kept ignorant, when these same women bear and raise children, they can pass on only their limited knowledge, and so perpetrate a vicious cycle of ignorance from generation to generation” (26).

<sup>35</sup> It is a bitter irony that women are also taught to obey men without question, and are also frequently kept uneducated about their bodies, so they do not know how to protect them.

tree<sup>36</sup>. But Parsipur's interpretation of rape and consequences is not the reality for Islamic women, who are frequently held responsible for this crime despite their inability to fight or prevent the act. This facet of the "virgin's cage" exposes the paradox of a system which does not empower women to protect themselves but blames them for being unable to. Both Hirsi Ali and Jan Goodwin identify these circumstances which are part of the rationale for hijab and for female seclusion, since men are not expected to exercise control over their sexual urges<sup>37</sup> (Hirsi Ali 21, Goodwin 9). Geraldine Brooks also considers female sexuality and the inequality of responsibility over sexuality in her book *Nine Parts of Desire*. The title comes from a Muslim adage attributed to Ali ibn Abu Taleb, the founder of Shi'ah Islam (the state religion in Iran) regarding sexuality: "Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men<sup>38</sup>." Since women "cannot" control themselves, it is up to men to control them; and in an instance in which any power is better than none, women are frequently used as monitors and keepers of each other's purity and proper behavior (Hirsi Ali 4). It seems odd, given all this information, that women are in a position of subordination to men and yet must be able to keep themselves from sex. This paradox, in turn, supports Hirsi Ali's concept of the "double virgins' cage," which imprisons a community. Parsipur's subversion of these methods of imprisonment through her rewriting of the experience of rape and the consequences of rape deemphasizes virginity while at the same time allowing women to reclaim their own sexuality and sexual power. While Faizeh is distraught over her rape, Munis remains calm, explaining that the violent loss of her virginity

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<sup>36</sup> Though the tree is not Mahdokht, since trees symbolize the woman who is a tree in this novel, this incident can be seen as a form of female vengeance.

<sup>37</sup> Hijab, also anglicized "hejab," is a term used for the veiling of women. It can refer specifically to the head and face coverings, or generally to imply Islamically correct modest female dress. Cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*.

<sup>38</sup> The translated adage can be found two pages before the first numbered page in Brooks's book.

is not that important. She also assures Faizeh: ““I will arrange things so that if you find a husband, you will be accepted into his house”” (Parsipur 100). Munis’s authority indicates a reclamation of body and self unusual in a society where the absence of a hymen renders a woman unworthy.

The concept of female worth in regards to the virgin’s cage is measured by virginity. This relates anatomy to the concept of imprisonment, and so these women can be considered imprisoned in their female bodies as well as imprisoned in buildings and oppressive ideas. This physical and mental incarceration is demonstrated by the lives of each of the women in *Women Without Men* before their time in the garden. Each of the women is in a space dominated by males in which women cannot make decisions about their lives. Karim notes:

Parsipur exposes a tangled web of ignorance, complicity, and duplicity surrounding virginity and the need to control and police women’s sexuality. It is this need for control that destroys relationships between men and women, and among women, and ultimately limits women’s capacity to grow and develop as full human beings. (160)

Intending to demonstrate the disastrous effects of a focus on female virginity, Parsipur also demonstrates the fallacies inherent in this emphasis, as well as the ways in which the system undercuts itself (153). This system of male dominance keeps women ignorant about their bodies and yet expects them to safeguard them properly. Moreover, women rendered powerless also take whatever status and power they can find by abusing other women as they have been abused<sup>39</sup>. In *Women Without Men*, Parsipur breaks the cycle by removing five women from male dominance and allowing them to recreate their lives on their own terms.

In addition to freedom from male dominance, these five women are able to navigate the world with minimal effect from the pressures of oppression from females. Females

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. chapter one.

internalize the precepts of male dominance and use them as controls against other women.

Hirsi Ali notes:

in the traditionally oriented Muslim communities, it is often the mothers who keep their daughters under their thumbs and the mothers-in-law who make the lives of their daughters-in-law unbearable. Cousins and aunts gossip endlessly about one another and about others. The effect of this social control is that Muslim women maintain their own repression (4).

Parsipur, mindful of the perpetuation of violence on women by women, corrects the abuse by creating a women's space in the garden. Also, since women are both victims and abusers, this is a cycle which is difficult to break. However, Parsipur proves that it can be done through her emphasis on revising the definitions of appropriate female behavior and thought, as well as correcting the misassignment of blame for sexual transgressions. In her novel, women can find their bodies acceptable and can consider their sexuality to be appropriate and desirable. In so doing, she opposes the reality in which Islamic women are socialized to regard sex as a wife's duty and their own bodies and sexual desires as abhorrent. Hirsi Ali notes that there is a strong sense of guilt and shame about being female which is passed to Muslim girls, insisting that Muslim "girls constantly feel that they are doing something wrong" (22). The end result of this pressure, which becomes an internal control as well as an external one, is a never-ending sense of guilt and shame. Accompanying the guilt and shame is a willingness to accept blame and responsibility for which one deserves to be punished.

As Karim notes,

in addition to the physical experience of veiling, Iranian women still contend with the Iranian concept of *sharm*, a difficult term to translate that loosely connotes rules and

behavior expected of women to maintain their ‘reputation.’ [Also translated “shame.”] Sharm governs standards of femininity, beauty, modesty, self-restraint, and, ultimately, a woman’s sense of sexual comportment and obedience” (139).

Women concern themselves with monitoring other women, engaging in the damaging gossip which Hirsi Ali discusses. As I discuss in chapter one, women who are considered “bad” internalize this vocabulary to their own harm; and as can be seen in chapter two, these definitions of appropriate behavior, of “good” and “bad” women, are continually fluctuating. Always watched, always judged, women have no safe female space simply to be women, a lack that Parsipur solves in her novel with a garden. In Parsipur’s novel, the garden is a place where the women are in charge but are not dictators of anyone’s life but their own, and are able to nurture themselves and to seek their own fulfillment instead of being relegated to a subordinate position.

In the same way that Parsipur writes expansive portraits of female characters, she creates a male character who moves beyond the confines of dominating Islamic patriarchy. Calling himself “the good gardener,” this man rejects the masculinist discourse of this patriarchy. Instead, he is kind, gentle, and deserving of the women’s company. As Parsipur reinvents the concept of Iranian womanhood, she also reinvents the concept of Iranian manhood with this man who does not follow the rules but rather designs his own. When he decides to marry, he invents his own wedding ceremony, refusing an imam. His chosen bride is Zarrinkolah, the former prostitute, who is, according to custom, the least marriageable. The gardener’s place in the garden is one of balance, in which both male and female live together harmoniously<sup>40</sup>. He is not there only for sexual congress and breeding, but is a

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<sup>40</sup> Parsipur is well-versed in Chinese philosophy, which is obvious in this novel with its emphasis on a balance of female and male energies resulting in harmony.

contributor to the garden<sup>41</sup>. Though the “good gardener” – the only name Parsipur gives him – cannot be read as a God-figure, her portraiture of this character because of his unearthly knowledge is suggestive of divinity. For instance, he knows how to care for a human tree in the unusual garden, and under his care Mahdokht-the-tree flourishes, goes to seed, and disperses<sup>42</sup>. With his wife he produces a lily, not a human child. Ostensibly, Parsipur places the good gardener in this women’s heaven so that they will have the male protection necessary in Iran, however the utopic aspect of the area and the women’s ability to reclaim their own power eventually renders this protection unnecessary. Parsipur makes it clear that the reason for the gardener’s presence, in addition to the balance he creates with his presence, is that he is able to care for the paradise and for the women within the paradise. As the gardener, he is charged with nurturing and protecting the garden which includes Mahdokht, which is another inversion<sup>43</sup> of the traditional gender role. His ability to call forth abilities that have been ascribed solely to women delineates Parsipur’s emphasis on gender balance and on harmonious coexistence; however, this is still a revolutionary concept. Parsipur extends the need for reformative thinking and redefining gender roles to both sexes through the presence of the gardener while explaining that this is necessary for the evolution of women’s lives in Iran.

By placing both men and women together in positions of authority in a space ultimately governed by women, Parsipur reclaims the notion of paradise from a masculinist paradigm. Gardens are over-determined symbols in Western literature, denoting the Garden of Eden which is, as Milton describes, Paradise lost due to human folly. In Islam the concept

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<sup>41</sup> I would be remiss if I do not mention the obvious references to the Garden of Eden in this *Women Without Men*. However, since my emphasis is not on evaluating this novel in a Western light, I will leave the references to Eden to the reader.

<sup>42</sup> After Mahdokht goes to seed and disperses, the character disappears as a single unit; however, Mahdokht’s seedlings plant themselves all over the world.

of garden denotes heaven, a place of reward after death. Suras 55 and 56 of the Koran describe a garden with a stream, lush fruits, lovely flowers, completed with several dark-eyed virgins, making the pleasures of heaven masculine in scope<sup>43</sup>. However, the Koran's emphasis on sexual equality implies that heaven is not denied to women. Reza Aslan notes that "beginning with the unbiblical conviction that men and women were created together and simultaneously from a single cell (4:1; 7:189) the Quran goes to great lengths to emphasize the equality of the sexes in the eyes of God . . .<sup>44</sup>" (*No God* 60). Unfortunately, this egalitarian concept has not translated to everyday existence, where men dominate religious life, prohibiting the involvement of women<sup>45</sup>. In *Women Without Men*, Parsipur equalizes the sexes through their balancing authority within the garden and by their freedom within its walls. Though the garden is owned and governed by a female, it is a male who knows how to care for it and has power in that knowledge. Karim suggests that "for each of the five women, the garden becomes a symbol of their freedom from male control and their capacity to reinvent themselves outside the confines of male society. Farrokhlaqa acts as a kind of patron/mother figure who enables the younger women to live independently in a utopic women's space" (164). In *Women Without Men*, Parsipur constructs a women's

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<sup>43</sup> From Sure 55 of N.J. Dawood's translation of the Koran:

"But for those who fear the Lord there are two gardens (which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?) planted with shady trees . . . Each is watered by a flowing spring . . . Each bears every kind of fruit in pairs . . . There are bashful virgins whom neither man nor jinnee will have touched before . . ."

From Sura 56:

"They shall recline on jeweled couches face to face, and there shall wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup of purest wine (that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason); with fruits of their own choice and flesh of fowls they relish. And theirs shall be the dark-eyed houris [angels], chaste as virgin pearls . . ."

<sup>44</sup> The two mentioned passages from N.J. Dawood's translation of the Koran:

4:1 – "You people! Have fear of your Lord, who created you from a single soul. From that soul he created its spouse and through them he bestrewed the earth with countless men and women."

7:189 – "It was He who created you from a single being. From that being He created his spouse, so that he might find comfort in her. And when he had lain with her, she conceived, and for a time her burden was light. She carried it with ease, but when it grew heavy, they both cried to God their Lord: 'Grant us a goodly child and we will be truly thankful.'"

<sup>45</sup> This is a circumstance that is as recognizable in the West as it is the East. [0]

heaven in which they have the chance to determine their own needs and desires, which puts them on equal footing with their male counterparts. Analogously, men are placed in positions of nurturing which allows both genders to consider their positions in light of harmonious coexistence and not domination and fear.

Parsipur continues this examination of balance and coexistence with a marriage. Elsewhere in the novel, marriage is accompanied with an imbalance of power that results in a dominant male and subordinate female. In the garden, the marriage between the good gardener and the former prostitute is a harmonious balance which results in a description of Enlightenment and union with the universe. Zarrinkolah's marriage seems quite unusual, given her status as a woman who engaged in sex as a prostitute who "was always cheerful" (Parsipur 73). Virginitly, "physical purity," is considered more precious than any other attribute in women; however, it is a prostitute who finds spiritual purity who is happiest in the end. Karim claims that "Parsipur's depiction of a prostitute performing ablutions, then praying naked to Ali, might also have been unnerving to the Islamic government" (163). However, I think that it is Zarrinkolah's ultimate spiritual purity and her ability to become one with the light might have been more unnerving because it indicates redemption<sup>46</sup>. Zarrinkolah is able to make herself pure without a hymen and this purity leads to her ultimate enlightenment which indicates no need for virginitly. Later, Zarrinkolah's disappearance with her husband in their child, a lily, indicates a spiritual purity, one that goes beyond physical constraints<sup>47</sup>. This underlines Parsipur's point regarding the relative unimportance of

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<sup>46</sup> The same Ali who founded Shi'ah Islam and gave the "ten parts of desire" definition of human sexuality.

<sup>47</sup> The lily, as Dr. Fatemeh Kesharvaz indicated to me via email, is a reference to purity. The creation of a lily-child can be seen as the ultimate redemption and reclamation of Zarrinkolah's body and soul; likewise, the lily could visually represent female genitalia, making this a symbol which recuperates female sex and sexuality.

virginity, a point spoken by Munis in the novel. After their rape, Munis accepts the loss of her virginity as a small trial, but Faizeh is devastated. To console her, Munis says:

“Faizeh dear, I died and was reborn twice. Now I see things differently. How can I explain it to you? I swear to God, if I had wings, I would fly. The unfortunate thing is that even though I died twice, my soul is still of this world. By God, believe me, virginity is not important. I swear to God, I will arrange things that if you find a husband, you will be accepted into his house.” (Parsipur 100)

Parsipur inserts “God” in this dialogue three times, indicating that Munis’s knowledge about virginity is divine through the invocation of God. Parsipur deemphasizes virginity in the garden, as of the five women in the garden, only Mahdokht’s virginity can be assumed. Though virginity in the novel is something that must be proven or disproved, Mahdokht’s virginity remains uncertain. Of the other four women in the garden, only Farrokhlaha lost her virginity through the only culturally acceptable means, marriage. The remaining three women engaged in sexual acts that are forbidden according to Muslim standards<sup>48</sup>. The only woman whose sexual activity is neither proven nor disproved is Mahdokht. What Mahdokht’s virginity is in this ideal world is no one’s business, instead of everyone’s business. By rendering virginity so unimportant, Parsipur begins destroying the virgin’s cage by demonstrating that the loss of emphasis generates harmony both among women and between the sexes. Additionally, Parsipur’s focus on the Islamic woman, rather than the condition of her hymen, is an integral component of her concept of Iranian feminism.

Parsipur’s fantasy world turns Iranian reality on its ear and reevaluates the way that people, situations, and customs are viewed. Frequently in Muslim communities, the private

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<sup>48</sup> Rape not being an unacceptable sexual act for women in the West but a violation against them for which they are not supposed to be blamed.

becomes public, such as with the emphasis on female chastity, which leads to a renewed emphasis on keeping the private hidden, i.e., female seclusion and hijab. By undoing the first inversion of public and private and restoring female sexuality to the individual woman, Parsipur overturns centuries of oppression and creates a world where mistrust and paranoia, where the need for control over female sexuality has no place. This layering and inversion mirrors, but does not replicate, the reality for Iranian women; instead, Parsipur rethinks the separation between public and private. In Parsipur's garden, one does not need to craft a hidden text to veil veracity. In Parsipur's reality, one in which *Women Without Men* is banned in Iran, one must fashion a veiled text to speak the truth.

Azar Nafisi notes this unusual aspect of life and literature in Iran in her memoir, in which she identifies the way that she, as well as every other Iranian citizen, has been written and then rewritten through another's ideal. She notes:

Our world under the mullahs' rule was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor. Not just our reality but also our fiction had taken on this curious coloration in a world where the censor was the poet's rival in rearranging and reshaping reality, where we simultaneously invented ourselves and were figments of someone else's imagination. (*Lolita* 25).

Both Nafisi and Parsipur examine a regime which has destabilized reality and individuality to an extent where fiction becomes the only means of escape. Using this paradigm, Nafisi and Parsipur take advantage of the regime's precedent and rewrite the possibilities for women in Iran. Furthermore, in this type of male-dominated society, fiction becomes a means to rebel, as Nafisi notes in her memoirs. After losing her job teaching in a university, she organized a private class to continue to educate young women. She concludes:

Fiction was not a panacea, but it did offer us a critical way of appraising and grasping the world – not just our world but that other world that had become the object of our desires . . . my girls, like millions of other citizens, by refusing to give up their right to pursue happiness, had created a dent in the Islamic Republic’s stern fantasy world (282).

For Nafisi, literature is resistance to the ruling ideology, a nod to plurality and to conversation which was missing within the confines of the regime. Using Western literature, Nafisi began to contest the regime, while at the same time noting the very surreal experience that post-revolutionary life in Iran was becoming. Relating a conversation with her student, she writes, “So, Nima asked, do you mean to say that both our lives and our imaginative lives are fairy tales? I smiled. Indeed, it seemed to me that at times our lives were more fictional than fiction itself” (241). Despite the rather hopeless tone in the passage, there is a reference to the precedent mentioned earlier in this chapter: the possibility that the position of Iranian women can again be drastically rewritten.

In spite of the fantastic elements of her story, Parsipur is careful not to create an all-female utopia; instead, the women in the garden go out and make their way in the world with men. And so, in a fantasy world Parsipur designs an ideal reality that might just come true. Parsipur subverts the subversion by using fantasy to produce a reality that is possible, no matter how impossible it may seem. In her memoir, Nafisi makes note of the possibilities of the impossible, insisting that in the early days of the revolution, “to think that the universities would be closed down seemed as far-fetched as the possibility that women would finally succumb to wearing the veil” (146). Parsipur seems to support this idea with her use of magical realism – it is as likely that women and men will live in harmony as it is that a

woman will give birth to a lily. But then perhaps it is likely, a possibility Parsipur leaves open through her careful crafting of the story.

## Conclusion

### Without Any Restrictions: The Hope for Islamic Feminism

I have a recurring fantasy that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights: the right to free access of imagination. I have come to believe that genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine and the right to use imaginative works without any restrictions. To have a whole life, one must have the possibility of publicly shaping and expressing private worlds, dreams, thoughts and desires, of constantly having access to a dialogue between the public and private worlds.

From *Reading Lolita In Tehran*  
by Azar Nafisi

This passage, taken from Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita In Tehran*, is emblematic of the recurring theme of the works examined in this study. Each of the writers and filmmakers, male and female, emphasizes a desire for intellectual freedom. This desire to speak "I" is the basis for individuality, which would undercut Islam's tribal mentality in which the individual is always subordinate to the group. Additionally, allowing women to speak and think freely would allow for the beginning of a conversation which would highlight and then deconstruct the paradoxical nature of the status of women in Islam. It is notable that at its inception, the Koran was a revolutionary document which protected women, giving them rights unheard of in seventh-century Arabia. Given this emphasis on the rights of women, and the Koranic insistence on gender equality, the low status of women in Islamic societies is one that cannot be considered a religious imperative. But, as Jan Goodwin asks, "how is it then that Islam, the only religion to formally outline the protections of women's rights, is also the faith most perceived to oppress them?" (34) As men reclaimed dominance after the death of Muhammad, women were reduced to a subordinate state; as men refused to allow women to be educated, women were convinced of the rightness of their

oppression and kept ignorant of their rights. Fortunately, this last statement assumes a lack of intellectual prowess which is not omnipresent in females, and many Islamic women understand that their oppression is neither prescribed nor right. As such, Islamic feminism begins in the struggle to survive everyday life and to improve matters for oneself.

The filmmakers and authors examined in this study have, through their work, become examples of resistance and courage. Dariush Mehrjui was educated in the West, and has pushed the boundaries of Iranian cinema in terms of his complex, character-driven films. Tahmineh Milani is widely known as Iran's foremost female filmmaker, and she continually raises questions and explores issues regarding women. Shahrnush Parsipur continually challenges the Iranian status quo with her revisionist concepts of Islamic life, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Azar Nafisi, and Irshad Manji do in realistic works. However important the contributions of these individuals are, it is necessary to also acknowledge that the women undertook these ventures at great personal risk. Shahrnush Parsipur spent many years in prison following the publication of *Women Without Men*, and is now living in exile. Tahmineh Milani was arrested and charged with a capital offense in Iran for *The Hidden Half*, which was originally permitted by Iran's censors. Jan Goodwin claims that "a secret report . . . by a special commission for Iran's Supreme Council on Security listed women, along with ethnic minorities and corruption, as potential threats to national security" (116). This makes approximately half the population a "danger to society;" therefore, being a woman in Iran implies that life shall be a struggle to either improve matters or to merely survive.

If being a female automatically makes one a threat, then it automatically makes one a target of suspicion and paranoia. However this conflict is viewed by the women themselves,

there is no difference between survival and resistance. In Iran, a woman is a feminist either by her resistance or, as seen in *Leila*, her acceptance. Leila's struggle and resistance is not overt, but remains solid because she is able through voiceover to think and feel and articulate to an audience her pain. This is what links her to the other female characters: Fereshteh, Zarrinkolah, Farrokhlaha, Munis, Faizeh, and Mahdokht. These women are able to speak "I" and tell their own stories as they are – perhaps clouded by the cultural impress of their circumstances, but nonetheless through their own perspectives. Because of this simple fact of female life, as exemplified through the characters created and by the lives of the authors and filmmakers themselves, it is clear that the state of Islamic Feminism is strong.

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