'The Danger of a Single Story': *Reading* (more than) *Lolita in Tehran*

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Abstract

'The danger of a single story' is incalculable especially when it shapes judgments in support of Western imperial aggression in the name of War on Terror. Following Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's stand on discursive dangers of a single story, Peter McLaren's take on the need of critical pedagogy to study who benefits from popularization of certain accounts and why and Hilde Lindemann Nelson's research on developing "counterstory" to offset the negative image an oppressive story conveys, I argue that a contrapuntal study of Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran is needed to expose its reductive, decontextualized and neo-orientalist details about Iranian women, culture and politics. For that, I draw comparisons with Fatemeh Keshavarz's Jasmine and stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran (2007), Shirin Ebadi's Iran awakening: A memoir of revolution and hope (2006) and Azadeh Moaveni's Lipstick jihad: A memoir of growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran (2005). This article argues for a critical dialogue between memoirs and their social and political settings to offset the negative implications of reductive and decontextualized accounts and encourage greater circulation of multiple perspectives on any situation.

Keywords: *post 9/11, counter story, critical pedagogy, neo-orientalism, memoir.*

1. Introduction

The Muslim woman is a "semiotic subject" and an unfixed signifier that has been "produced and reproduced" in orientalist and neo-orientalist discourses to further the interests of the West (Zayzafoon, 2005, p.2).[2] Never has this had such an unsettling repercussions than in the case of new positioning(s) she has received through a double bind: how our elite group of neo-orientalists/neo-comprador intelligencia ties horns with the US liberal, neo conservative agenda tuned *more*

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[2] While Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon studies the Muslim woman as a semiotic subject that is produced and reproduced by Orientalist, Islamic, feminist and nationalistic discourses, my take here is limited only to how she is being intercepted by the imperialist agenda furthered both by the West and our neo-orientalist comprador intellegencia.

to justifying rationale for War on Terror than to really create acceptance for human rights in this part of world and, even far less, to humanise these exotic subjects for their western counterparts. With greater prominence of the memoirs from the Muslim world in the global literary market especially post-9/11, we have multiple voices from the Muslim world, on a variety of tangents of literary merit, popularity and critical reception both at national and international level. Given this immense flow of information, one wonders why is it that some writers are considered authentic voices on the Muslim world, especially even those who are discredited within their own homelands for their dubious veracity or imbalanced inclusiveness towards diverse ideological standpoints. Further, despite multiple and contending perspectives and discourses available on Muslim women of any region, a contrapuntal[1] reading fails widespread circulation; certainly not all could be speaking for what is harnessed to US neo-imperialist agenda. Why, to borrow Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), are we facing "the danger of a single story"? Existence of and yet an impetuous disregard of such multiple textual-discursive worlds necessitates what Peter McLaren's critical pedagogy promotes, that is, to study "how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not" (2003, p. 72). This comes as no surprise that the "memoirs by Iranian female writers such as Azar Nifisi, Marjani Strapi, Firoozeh Dumas, and others 'found such phenomenal commercial success at a time when Washington hawks would like the author's country of birth to be the next battleground in the total war of the twenty-first century" (Mottahedeh, 2004, p. 2).

2. "Selective Memories" and Political Climate Post 9/11

Legitimacy for works, especially memoirs, from Iran and the extent of their production, dissemination, and consumption therefore depends upon recourse to a specific political climate and power structure. It is therefore not coincidental that publications of memoirs from Iran rose unprecedently from six publications in 1980s to about 18 publications in just five years span since September 11 (Acho, 2013, pp. 2-3). In this milieu *Reading Lolita in Tehran* holds unparalleled popularity for reinforcing the orientalist traits, invoking western literature as a

[1] Edward Said's counterpoint or contrapuntal reading strategies call for "a different kind of reading and interpretation". While Said uses "interpretive change of perspective … to challenge the sovereign and unchallenged authority of the allegedly detached Western observer" (1993, pp 50, 51), in this article the authority of allegedly detached no-orientalist observer/writer is called to question.

frame to embed and ostracize her indigenous realities and sidestep American imperialist interventions in the region that long predated the Islamic revolution she so disparages against. It was quite a treat to American readers and proved a fulcrum to bolster politics hoovering over "Axis of Evil"[1] agenda. It is strange that in America where *RLT* topped *The New York Times* bestseller list for more than 90 weeks, another memoir by an Iranian Noble Prize winner for Human Rights, Shirin Ebadi, titled *Iran awakening: A memoir of revolution and hope* (2006) had to struggle hard to get publication rights in America as the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control's (OFAC) regulation on the import of books from Iran and other embargoed countries[2] was staunchly in practice then. Ebadi petitioned against it claiming, "the ban [is] a critical missed opportunity, both for Americans to learn more about my country and its people from a *variety* of Iranian voices and for a better understanding to be achieved between our two nations" (emphasis mine) (2006, p. 212). For Ebadi (2006) this restriction was incomprehensible considering that "the U.S. government, the self-proclaimed protector of a free way of life, would seek to regulate what Americans could or could not read" (p. 211). In comparison to the one sided and decontextualized details of repression under the Islamic revolution that *RLT* painstakingly sketches, Ebadi's memoir, with an even-handed emphasis on external manipulations and internal lapses, provides historical contextualisation of the western and US infiltration in the internal affairs of Iran as well as worsening of indigenous challenges. For now, without going into the details on how Ebadi's memoir is a closer and truer rendering of socio-historical changes that imbricated Iran in a vexed relationship with the western world, something that Nafisi has altogether skipped in her memoir, I would cap my discussion here by citing Ebadi's sneer on President Bush's State of the Union Speech where he promised Iranians '"As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you"' by exposing that "It is hard to imagine the president making this statement while Iranians' right to publish accounts of such stands in America was yet in peril" (2006, p. 213). Only a "collective amnesia" could have masked such false promises considering that the catastrophic consequences of US invasion of Afghanistan were already manifest by the time President Bush made the address, and Iraqi invasion was already quite imminent. Since then similar promises have

[1] U.S. President George W. Bush used this phrase in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002 to describe foreign governments (mainly North Korea, Iran, Iraq) that harbored, financed and aided terrorists.

[2] Embargoed countries face economic sanctions imposed by United States's OFAC. Such sanctions and embargoes include bans, such as, on the export of arms, withdrawal of financial aid, and restrictions on economic assistance.

incessantly been made in support of US rhetoric of War on Terror and one wonders "was there a method to the madness of US military adventurism around the globe" (Dabashi, 2011, p. 67). This collective amnesia finds strength in every new spate of memoirs emerging from a country of targeted interest in the War on Terror and the reasons are just as obvious. Hamid Dabashi (2011) links this to how "selective memories" in the form of memoirs support US global warmongering (p. 67).

This process of "selective memory" has been ascendant especially in the post 9/11 literary scene regarding writings about Islam, Muslims, Iran and Iranians, a strategy that Hamid Dabashi links to creating a good alibi for western intervention in the Muslim world. Before moving on, Nahid Mozaffari's comment is very apt in terms of how suddenly texts about and from Iran were sought by mainstream publishers. Attesting to unprecedented reception of memoirs from Iran in post 9/11 American literary market, she says:

> Until recently, we had to get sizable grants, plead, or to pull strings to get mainstream publishers to take a cursory look at any manuscript from or about Iran. This is fortunately no longer so, in the case of memoirs. (The old routine still applies for novels, short stories, poetry, and scholarly works.) These days, memoirs are to the publishing industry what reality shows are to television. They have taken over the cultural landscape for bizarre reasons and are making loads of money (2006, p. 516).

3. Social Position of a Memoirist and Discursive Dangers

So far, my discussion has centered on certain "discursive and material contexts" that benefit from the "probable or actual effects of the words" (Alcoff, 1992, p.26) in such memoirs. Moving further from this, while still following Linda Alcoff's position, my discussion now turns towards how social location of a memoirist can be "discursively dangerous" (1992, p. 7) if it increases or reinforces the oppression of the group spoken for, especially as "how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will in turn affect its perceived significance (for specific hearers)" (Alcoff, 1992, p. 13). This center stages the elite background of most of the Iranian women memoirists popular in the West. Sana Fotouhi shares privileged background of such writers in "Self-orientalisation and re-orientation: A glimpse at Iranian women's memoirs". Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004), my chief focus in this article, is no exception. With parents holding important political positions in Shah's regime and foreign education, her pro-west disposition cannot be discredited. I find Nafisi to neatly

fit in the description Marilyn Booth (2010) provides of such memoirists. Booth studies their immense popularity as stemming from re-orientalist perspectives on Iran and their "association with the western humanist discourse and studying the Iranian/ Muslim societies with a characteristic enlightened separation, achieved mainly due to these memoirists' intellectual and physical journeys to the West" (pp. 158-159).

Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh situate Azar Nafsi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in this scenario. They do not find faults in her writing from a secular perspective, but they criticize her for eliding over the gains that Islamic feminists had made contemporaneous to her stay in Iran. According to Donaldey and Ghosh (2008), there seems to be a deliberate silencing of other perspectives, as "it is not possible for her to be unaware of the emergence of the various women's journals and movements, given the elite, educated background Nafisi shares with their most active participants, such as Shirin Ebadi, Mehrangiz Kar, and Shahla Lahiji" (pp. 628-629). She does not mention National Union of Iranian Women (NUIW) founded by left-leaning women educated in the West and active in the struggle against the Shah's dictatorial regime. No mention is made of *Barabari* (Equality) and *Zanan Dar Mobarezeh* (Women in Struggle) and countless other journals active even after the Revolution. It is equally strange that Nafisi does not mention women's magazine *Zanan E. Emrooz* (Women Today) that since 1991 to its banning in 2008 continued to voice problematic women's rights issues, such as discriminatory laws regarding divorce, inheritance, custody, discrimination at work place and sexism. The absence of such details alludes to the presence of active and deliberate silencing process that Nafisi undertakes to exclude all that would counterpose her neo-orientalist stance. This cherry-picking of details that support her objectives and silencing the multiple other positionalities that contradict her stance finds best expression in Azadeh Moaveni's comment on her mother who happened to do the same in selective appreciation of American and Iranian ways of life, depending upon what suited her: "Maman thought values were like groceries; you'd cruise through the aisles, toss the ones you fancied into your cart, and leave the unappealing ones on the shelf. When I was a teenager we constantly fought over her pilfering through Iranian and American values at random, assigning a particular behaviour or habit she felt like promoting to the culture she could peg it to most convincingly." (2005, p. 20). This brings me to how Nafisi's text leaves out rich and diverse history of Iranian culture and women's activism, and thus to my principle aim in this writing, that is, "*Reading* (more than) *Lolita in Tehran*".

4. Oppressive Identity vs Counterstory

To begin my quest, the first work that helps me foreground counter position to the claims Nafisi makes in her memoir is Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran* (2007). I read Keshavarz as providing what Hilde Lindemann Nelson calls a "counterstory," one "that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (Nelson, 2001, p.6). Keeping in line with the two functions of counterstory defined by Nelson (2001), Keshavarz identifies the "fragments which form the construction of the oppressive identity", that is, the tropes of Orientalism that seep through *RLT*, and retells the story "to make visible the morally relevant details" that this "master narrative have suppressed" (Nelson, 2001, p.7). If this "retelling" is successful, "the group members will stand revealed as respect-worthy moral agents" (Nelson, 2001, p.7). She is principally motivated by the fact that Nafisi's *RLT* studies the cultural change occurring in the early decades of the 1979 Iranian revolution in the light of a range of western works and altogether overlooks indigenous literature that was "lively and controversial" in years prior to, and even during and after (2007, p.7). She takes Nafisi to task for teaching Western literature "as a groundbreaking act or as something on the order of taming the savages." (2007, p. 19). Keshavarz also counters Nafisi's assertion in *RLT* that "we [Iranians] lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works" (2003, p. 25) by mentioning in *Jasmine and the stars* (2007) that her own experience of living on three continents did not show her a culture that "publicly" celebrated literature more than that in Iran. Keshavarz (2007) further adds that "How many a baker, shopkeeper, or taxi driver had I heard whispering Omar Khayyam under his breath. Now this book [*RLT*], which meant to celebrate the power of literature, denied and erased this most prevalent cultural behavior in the society I knew so well" (2007, p. 19). If anything, resembling this, Nafisi mentions joining a small group who came together to study classical Persian literature on Sunday nights in the participants' houses where they continued to gather year after year, sometimes even during the blackouts by candlelight. The power of reading poetry and prose from "Rumi, Hafez, Sa'adi, Khayyam, Nezami, Ferdowsi, Attar, Beyhagi" was such that, according to Nafisi, "the magical texts held us together" despite the participants' "personal and political differences" (2003, p. 172). Writers of such significance are merely listed out in passing even though the debt Nafisi owes to these literary giants for honing her story telling skills and power of expression is immense. It was during this period that she had started her writing career as a literary critic which had over two decades practice before she took up writing *RLT* where she garners this skill to pay homage and recognition to works and writers which were not totally responsible for shaping her literary sensibility or critical

acumen. On top of this, one naturally expects that since Nafisi valorizes the role these Persian writers played in taking "revenge[from Arab conquerors] by recreating their burned and plundered history through myth and language", she would invoke them in *RLT*, especially, as she herself points out that history seems to repeat itself in the form of "domestic invaders" [the leaders of Iranian Revolution] "who had come to us in the name of our own past but who had now distorted every inch of it and robbed us of Firdowsi and Hafez" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 172). Despite this painful realization on her part, one wonders why Nafisi did not invoke them or their works in her memoir? Would it have made her work too context specific and not of relevance and interest to international readership? This sounds plausible considering how another memoir *Journey from the land of no* (2004) by an Iranian woman Roya Hakakian fails to get due reception in the American market as, unlike Nafisi, the comparisons she draws is with the political allegory of radical Iranian author Samad Behrangi's *The little black fish* (2008) which required a pre-knowledge which the westerners lacked and hence "the book's less provocative nature may be a fundamental reason why this text was not as popular" (Acho, 2013, p. 32).

Nafisi capitalized on western readers' knowledge of their classical fictions as well as their curiosity to interpret another culture in the backdrop of their texts and scenarios. Her memoir is structured around works such as *Lolita*, *The great gatsby, Daisy miller*, and *Pride and prejudice* with section headings appearing as "Lolita," "Gatsby," "James," and "Austen". Interestingly the only Middle Eastern heroine, Scheherazade, that Nafisi briefly refers to in the text is conspicuously absent from the section headings. Moreover, instead of drawing inspiration from a Middle Eastern heroine to survive in and challenge the repressive regime that Nafisi paints in the image of King Shahryar by saying "A stern ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher king, had come to rule our land" (2003, p. 28) (hence invoking strong orientalist interpretations of *Thousands and one nights*), she takes Lolita as an emblem of quest for self-autonomy and freedom. She proudly claims that "we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination" (2003, p. 25). In this she makes two instrumental errors. One, by choosing Lolita over Scheherazade, she prefers a story of a twelve-year-old girl's sexual exploitation by a middle-aged pedophile, a story that was called "repulsive …highbrow pornography" (as cited in Colapinto, 2015). Second, she chooses a heroine known more for her sexual appeal over the Oriental Scheherazade whose essence of

sexual attraction is purely "cerebral" (Mernissi, 2001, 39) and "the most powerful erotic weapon" she has is her "*nutq,* or capacity to think in words and penetrate a man's brain by using carefully selected terms" (Mernissi, 2001, p. 38). Altogether overlooked is the fact that "In the original tales, Scheherazade's body is hardly mentioned, but her learning is repeatedly stressed" (Mernissi, 2001, p. 39). Indeed, choosing Lolita over Scheherazade is a bad bargain after all. Not only this, despite "its claims to gender-related concerns", *RLT* has indulged in "significant acts of erasure" through inattention to Iranian women involved in "intellectual and artistic expression or social change" (Keshavarz, 2007, p. 21). Keshavarz (2007) does not find any justification for the "erasure" of all such figures in *RLT* except that their "presence would have disapproved the theory suggesting a complete Iranian collapse in the absence of the West" (p. 127). It is to remedy this that Keshavarz comes up with a long list of prominent Iranian women writers, filmmakers, painters, publishers, musicians, human rights activists such as Forough Farrokhzad, Shahrnush Parsipur, Simin Behbahani, Shirin Ebadi, Tahmineh Milani, Rakhshan Bani. She also mentions contributions of many male writers and still regrets not being able to do justice to those "Missing" male and female figures who she couldn't mention because of scarcity of space. Despite their brief profiles, each figure leaves an unforgettable impression on the readers. On the other hand, in celebrating the western heroines, Nafisi even fails to bring to life the handful female students that she read these works with. I agree with Kristyn Acho that "Indeed, so peripheral are these characters that Nafisi's readers may often find themselves forgetting the names and personalities of the women in her reading group" (2013, p. 23).

Even from the peritexts the two texts provide counterbalancing positions. Nafisi's book cover is a cropped image of two Iranian girls bent over reading something, probably *Lolita,* indeed a provocative suggestion to a western reader aware of strong immoralism attached to this work and aware also of Iranian revolution, and media's incessant portrayal of Iran as "Axis of Evil". Nothing could better turn on wild fantasies than this image which is "an iconic burglary from the press" (Dabashi, 2006, p. 75) of a picture where two Iranian girls are bent over *Mosharekat,* a leading reformist newspaper, to read parliamentary election results. Dabashi goes so far as to say this burglary that starts from the book cover goes further afield in neo-orientalist depiction of Iranian society and glorification of the West as a haven of liberal freedoms, democracy and individual rights.

According to Dabashi (2011) these kinds of writers are native informers whose principal task is to fake "authority, authenticity, and native knowledge" (p. 72)

and justify imperial projects of the West by exaggerating details of oppression in their societies and by presenting West, by comparison, as haven of freedom, democracy and human rights. Single narratives are then taken as generalized cases; a single story is considered to represent all Muslim women experience. Such testimonial accounts of oppression are indeed "soft weapons" whose messages are "co-opted as propaganda" in Western war on terror (Whitlock, 2007, p. 17). Interestingly, this image created a perception that was so strong, rightly so for the work is peppered with countless details that merely lambast the Islamic revolution and the regime, that her declaration gets lost in the maze of details that prove otherwise: "I want to emphasize once more that we were not Lolita, the Ayatollah was not Humbert and this republic was not what Humbert called his princedom by the sea. Lolita was not a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 35). It is strange that a writer with this belief should have let the publishers choose an image which has set judgements in one direction. Against this, Fatemeh Keshavarz (2007) presents on the cover two modern Iranian women, holding placards on which is written in Persian, "We women want equal rights" and "violence against women equals violence against humanity". Two extreme perspectives on Iranian women prove how dangerous is it to take Nafisi's text as representative of the entire society.

5. Historical Causality of Political & Social Challenges

Coming to the historical causality of political challenges that imbricated Iran in a vexed relationship with the West, I again find the details that implicate the West are not elaborated or investigated in Nafisi's memoir. While Nafisi criticizes both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein, she does not criticize U.S. politics in the region, never exposing, for example, that how the United States backed Iraq during its war against Iran, which other Iranian female memoirists have categorically pointed out in their works. In the Iran- Iraq war episode, Nafisi's slight indictment of the West is lost in a haze of numerous other possibilities, implicating only the Islamic regime or its excesses at home and abroad:

> What triggered the war? Was it the arrogance of the new Islamic revolutionaries, who kept provoking what they deemed to be reactionary and heretical regimes in the Middle East and inciting the people of those countries to revolutionary uprisings? Was it the fact that the new regime held a special animosity towards Saddam Hussein, who had expelled the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini from Iraq after reportedly making a deal with the Shah? Was it the old hostility between Iraq and Iran and the fact that the Iraqis, with

> promises of support from a West hostile to Iran's new revolutionary government, dreamed of a swift and sweet victory? (2003, p. 157)

The Iran-Iraq war had harmed both the sides. Reflecting on the extent of human and non-human cost that both the countries had to pay in this war, Ebadi muses who are the real winners then. For her, rightly so, the winners are the European companies that sold Saddam his chemical weapons as well as the American firms that sold both sides arms: "They amassed fortunes, their bank accounts swollen, their families, in Bonn and Virginia, untouched" (2006, p. 92). Such indictment of the complicated role played by the West in destabilising the world peace is totally missing in Nafisi's text. Nafisi also does not criticize Reza Shah and his policies, for example, compulsory unveiling which must have angered many women back then just as the compulsory veiling angered many women after the Revolution and that she so painfully delineates. His mention is not given in terms of the excesses against the masses, but in terms of how his grave was not even spared by the revolutionaries who decimated his grave and turned it in to a public lavatory at the start of the Revolution (Nafisi, 2003, p. 230). No mention is made of Mossadegh's policies and why CIA engineered a coup in ousting him except referring to his twelfth death anniversary whence the two strongest opposition groups made up of secular progressives (Ayatollah Shariatmadari's Muslim People's Republican Party and the National Democratic Front) managed to gather about a million people to his place of burial (Nafisi, 2003, p. 92). She even does not probe in to why was it that in "replac[ing] the Iranian dynasty with a far more reactionary and despotic regime, both the Iranian people and the intellectual elites had shown at best a serious error in judgment" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 102). And why was it that the people were so desperate in "demanding destruction of the old, without much thought to the consequences" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 102). This would have required her to talk about issues that another Iranian female memoirist, Azadeh Moaveni (2005) succinctly summarises in *Lipstick jihad: A memoir of growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran*:

> The Shah, in the classic style of Middle East potentates, reigned with an authoritarian hand and an allegiance to policies favored by his American backers. He spent vast reserves of oil money on the latest American military technology, but neglected to manage the urbanization and rapid growth that was transforming Iranian society. While he staged baroque, extravagant spectacles in honor of the Persian dynastic tradition, his critics were silenced, and great swaths of Iranian society stayed poor. (p. 7)

In *Iran awakening*, Ebadi (2006) also talks about a similar situation where the

common masses feared even protesting against genuine abuse of their rights. Talking about on-campus demonstration by students, she refers to how the students protested against the tuition as they were afraid of persecution by the SAVAK (the Shah's secret police), "though what they really wanted to chant was more like 'Stop squandering our oil revenue on fleets of American fighter planes!' or 'Come back from St. Moritz and deal with urban poverty, please!'" (2006, p. 16).

Criticism of western imperialism is conspicuously absent from Nafisi's text, which provides a strong justification for why it easily got co-opted by a dominant U.S. ideology. In contrast to this, Ebadi's and Moavani's memoirs do not lose sight of the fact that western intervention in Iranian politics has made Iranian people highly skeptical even of pro-western forces in their midst. They criticize the US for supporting the Shah, for a 1953 CIA-backed overthrow of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh who had nationalized the oil industry, and for assisting Iraq with satellite images of Iranian troop deployment and for keeping silent over chemical weapons used in major operations against Iran. Before moving on, I would like to quote Ebadi here for describing the feelings of the Iranians after CIA engineered ousting of Mossadegh. In *Iran awakening*, Ebadi writes "It was a profoundly humiliating moment for Iranians, who watched the United States intervene in their politics as if their country were some annexed backwater, its leader to be installed or deposed at the whim of an American president and his CIA advisers" (2006, p. 5).

Even the social pressures in the wake of Islamic Revolution appear greatly exaggerated, decontextualized and lopsided in Nafisi's text. These pressures and trials appear highly embroidered when studied in comparison to the two other memoirs from this region. When criticizing the encroachment of personal liberties by indigenous forces, Ebadi and Moavani do not spare any force, be it the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK (or National Organization for Intelligence and Security), or the *komiteh*, morality police, constituted after Islamic Revolution. What truly differentiates Nafisi's outright indictment of the curbing of civil liberties after the Revolution from Ebadi's analyses of the same situation is the later's openness to registering a change the Islamic revolutionaries brought by integrating women from lower classes even while they tried to annihilate rights of countless other educated women. When she was caught by the *Kotimeh* and brought to their headquarters along with other women, they were made to listen to eighteen-year-old girl's harangue which Ebadi analyses in a broader context. She reflects that Islamic revolution had given opportunity to countless tradition bound

women whose parents would never have allowed them to move out of the house as this was sure to spoil their honour. The opportunity to serve Islam however proved a compelling pretext to let such women assume roles that had hitherto been denied them. Ebadi is so right in saying that "Under the shah's Iran, this young woman would have been sitting in her house, washing or chopping something" (p.104). And indeed, this was a huge step forward in mobilizing women from conservative factions, which is a revolution of its kind, considering its enduring effects over the years with more women gaining confidence and experience. Ebadi says that "This gave women from traditional families an unprecedented self-confidence. They realized that contrary to what they had assumed, they mattered to something beyond their homes. Their votes counted. They could play a role" (p.104). While Nafisi presents bleak scenario of everything happening due to morality police, Moavani gives a very bright picture of how people evaded its tentacles and continued to wrest moments of pleasure and enjoyment. She adds that the young couples had become immune to such raids by morality police and had perfected the art of "inventing and synchronizing stories on the spot," knowing also the types who would either accept bribery or soften to sound arguments and controlled reflexes (2005, p.55). And above all people had rather become immune to it: "They considered the morality police part of the geography of the city, like the Alborz Mountains and the long boulevards" (2005, p.55). Another important breakthrough was the young people's recourse to the digital world because "online, they could be as outrageous and indecent, tame or sensitive as they pleased" (2005, p.70). Such accounts confirm that life under Islamic revolutionaries was not that stifling after all.

The neo-orientalist claims Nafisi makes about Iranian men and women, women's rights and Muslim fundamentalist regime are therefore offset compared to rich history of women's resilience and activism in Iran and the immense literary treasure trove that Iranians have inherited as well as their eagerness for reading foreign literary works in original or in translations; an activity which has been the norm and not an exception that Nafisi portrays as being limited only to liberal minded individuals like she and her female students who had to risk their lives to read these western works. While this may attract interested- sympathizers in the West, for natives this grand aggrandizing and essentializing is troubling. Even this trend is criticized by serious scholars in the West who know where to look for if they want to know right information about Iran. Patrick Clawson's view is particularly apt here that "what becomes established in the Western mind as the realities about Iran may not bear much resemblance to what careful scholarship demonstrates. Therefore, a good rule of thumb for learning about Iran is to read

the obscure scholarly books and ignore anything that sells well" (Clawson, 2007). Indeed, immense popularity of a memoir in the West is an indication of the fact that it directly or indirectly condones or glosses over some of the grave injustices that the West primarily triggers. I would end my discussion on this article by citing Manuela Costantino's judgement on *Persepolis* (a graphic memoir in the manner of *RLT*) which holds equally well for Nafisi's text: "had it displayed anti-American or anti-Western sentiment, would [it] have been so widely circulated and therefore so popular" (2008, p. 433). Certainly not. So, dangers of a single story need to be exposed through more and more research on counter perspectives that help fit the missing and silenced fragments of a culture back together. This is because, and I quote Keshavarz (2007) to also shed last comment on *RLT*,

> Portraits of people or of social and cultural conditions should be like tapestries woven out of a hundred different threads, or like mosaics made of many tiles. When there are holes in the tapestry or tiles missing, the entire picture is distorted. Like many works contributing to the New Orientalist narrative, *RLT* contains a few patches of truth. In its entirety, it is a tapestry with many holes, a mosaic that has every other piece missing. (p. 18)

6. Conclusion

Reading Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the light of works produced by Iranian women from different ideological standpoints helps challenge stereotypical views about the abject status of Muslim women as well as to disperse "any sense of a transhistorical [Muslim] female experience, or the notion of the [Muslim] female body as the ground of a unified and consistent meaning" (Whitlock, 2000, p. 3). To this end, I have studied women writings from different standpoints for a "polyphonous richness, with internal divergences, with differences and tensions in evidence" (Narayan, 1997, p.143). This has been done to avoid what Adichie says "the danger of a single story". I believe different discursive perspectives impart what Chinua Achebe says, "a balance of stories" and which Adichie recommends as important because "many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize" (*The danger of a single story*, 2009).

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