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Orientalist Framing of Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Study of Iranian-American Memoirs

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Abstract

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the deposition of the pro-American Pahlavi regime in Iran, an interest in the country as a mythical, complex, and conflict-ridden place has magnified among the American public. Exilic Iranian memoirs began to emerge after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and surged after September 11, 2001, claiming to provide an authentic depiction and explanation of the Iranian society and politics and the ways in which it relates to the West and Western interests. The present article aims to analyze the ways in which post-Revolutionary Iran has been framed through memoirs written by Iranian-Americans. Through a framing analysis of fifteen selected memoirs on Iran, the article identifies and presents six main frames in the analyzed texts based on Edward Said's Orientalism. The paper concludes that instead of providing a more or less objective depiction that acknowledges the diversity and heterogeneity of the Iranian society and politics, the selected texts reflect the existence of an industry of memoirists that produce content depicting Iran in an orientalist way. Such an approach further inhibits any meaningful understanding and rectification of the existing misconceptions.

Keywords: Framing analysis, Iran, Iranian-Americans, Memoir, Orientalism

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1. Introduction

The memoir as a form of literary genre plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, as the literature of any period is in many ways a reflection of its historical context and social feelings. It situates texts in history and exposes how historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts (McLeod, 2010). Joseph Massad (2007, p. 272) maintains that "The ideas and representations that emerge in literary texts generally reflect journalistic and political debates (just as much as television and cinema do) and indeed exercise considerable influence on these media". On the other hand, memoirs are one of the most popular literary genres published in the United States (Atlas, 1996; Motlagh, 2008; Yagoda, 2010). Researchers have referred to American's increasing interest in memoirs as the "memoir boom"; an industry that has become part of the society's consumer culture, defining how Americans perceive major events and define and articulate their citizenship (Rak, 2013). They have also highlighted how in some instances, what truly counts as fiction is loosely defined or subtitled as "memoir" in order to sell more (Carr, 2014).

Besides the general interest of the American public in memoirs, the desire for detailed information about Iran, which is connected with the political tensions between the two countries, has created a booming market for Iranian-American memoirs. The timing and the lucrative market are not coincidental, and display the relation between politics and the market and public consumption. This is evident when considering three waves of memoirs that followed after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, each wave being influenced by a political conflict. The first wave dates to the hostage crisis, although the only notable memoir in this period is *Not without My*

Daughter[1]. The second wave was followed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (more specifically with 2003 Azar Nafis's *Reading Lolita)*; and the third wave began with the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential election. Interest in learning about Iran has continued with the increased attention devoted by Western media to Iran during the nuclear negotiations, the signing of the JCPOA, and its aftermath. While the first period is a starting point for the framing of Iran - within the Orientalist meta-frame - as the uncivilized other, during the second and third waves, the stereotypical representation of Iran was consolidated. The issue of women's rights and their alleged suppression under the "Islamic regime" gained increased currency during the second wave. Finally, the third wave is mainly concerned with "political prisoners" and "human rights" and began with the 2009 Iranian presidential election.

Iranian diaspora and expatriates produce a significant amount of "knowledge" about post-revolutionary Iran in the United States. Such literary texts can play as a primer or guidebook for foreign audiences. Moreover, the success of a book can provoke the production of a series of such books (Said, 1978) and increase the reader's demand for texts that confirms his presumptions. Therefore, the narratives of exilic Iranians are believed to the extent that their description becomes the reader's experience of reality (Said, 1978). After the Revolution, the US became host to the largest Iranian diaspora community (Persis & Rahimieh, 2008, p. 7). The present paper intends to analyze fifteen memoirs published by Iranians in

1. Refer to (Nazari, 2017) for a detailed analysis of the construction of post-revolutionary Iran through Betty Mahmoudi's memoir.

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English[1]. The writers have very different backgrounds and their intentions for writing memoirs and their targeted audiences might vary considerably from one to another. However, all the writers advance particular narratives of social and political events and players in post-Revolutionary Iran in the West.

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1. The selected books are:
   a) Bahrampour, T. (1999). *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
   b) Nafisi, A. (2003). *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random House.
   c) Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
   d) Ḥakkakiyan, R. (2004). *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*. New York: Crown Publishers.
   e) Moaveni, A. (2005). *Lipstick jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran*. New York: Public Affairs.
   f) Rachlin, N. (2006). *Persian Girls: A Memoir*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.
   g) Ardalan, D. (2007). *My Name is Iran: A Memoir*. New York: H. Holt.
   h) Nafisi, A. (2008). *Things I've been Silent about: Memories*. New York: Random House.
   i) Moaveni, A. (2009). *Honeymoon in Tehran: Two Years of Love and Danger in Iran*. New York: Random House.
   j) Isfandiyārī, H. (2009). *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran*. New York: Ecco.
   k) Bahari, M., & Molloy, A. (2010). *Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival*. New York: Random House.
   l) Kahlili, R. (2010). *A Time to Betray: The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran*. New York: Threshold Editions.
   m) Saberi, R. (2010). *Between Two Worlds: My Life and Captivity in Iran*. New York: Harper.
   n) Alinejad, M. (2019). *The Wind in My Hair: One Iranian Woman's Courageous Struggle against being Forced to Wear the Hijab*. Little Brown
   o) Rezaian, J. (2020). Prisoner: My 544 Days in an Iranian Prison - Solitary Confinement, A Sham Trial, High-Stakes Diplomacy, and the Extraordinary Efforts it Took to Get Me out.

This study selected all the memoirs that were reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*. The *New York Times Book Review* is of significance for a number of reasons: the books reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* include those memoirs published after 1979, which is important for this study. It is also one of the most influential and widely read book review publications in the industry and receives 750 to 1000 books from authors and publishers weekly, of which 20 to 30 are chosen for review (C-SPAN, 2006). While selecting memoirs based on the *New York Times Book Review* might exclude works by less-known or more obscure writers, the concern of this study is those that have gained more public visibility and thus possibly have more influence on "knowledge production" and public opinion. Using Edward Said's Orientalism, the paper intends to address the following main research question: How has post-revolutionary Iran been framed for American audiences through memoirs written by Iranian-Americans? What are the main themes?

1. 1. Review of Literature

The ever-expanding growth of literature produced by Iranian-Americans has naturally led to an equivalent growing body of academic literature aiming to understand and explain this trend from different perspectives, including those of political, and identity or gender-based frameworks. In *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora* (2015), Sanaz Fotouhi examines a wide range of Iranian diaspora literature and issues related to migration, identity, belonging and in-betweenness.

Other scholars have pointed to the ideological aspects of this specific genre. In their analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, for example, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh maintain that "The book

provides the kind of ideological perspective that American and European audiences have come to expect, if not demand, from women in Muslim countries" (2008, p. 624). They warn that audiences' lack of familiarity with Iranian historical and political context could lead to "recirculating the damaging orientalist trope of the oppressed Muslim woman" (Donadey & Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008, p. 624). The other example is Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars (2007)*, which was written to respond to Azar Nafisi's memoir and challenging popular perceptions of Iran as an oppressive, and intellectually backward place. Farzaneh Milani's *On Women's Captivity in Islamic World (2008)* and Roksana Bahramitash *The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism* elaborate on how US neoconservatives use women's right as an excuse to justify military intervention. In *Constructing an Axis of Evil,* Marandi and Pirnajmuddin (2009) analyze several memoirs written by Iranian women and argue that Orientalist discourse or the indigenous Orientalism of such writers works in parallel with US foreign policy and acts as an excuse for justifying military intervention against Iran. Similar research has been conducted by Rastegar (2006), Fotouhi (2012), Nazari (2015), Ghasemi Tari and Marandi (2019), and Maggi (2020). Daniel Grassian, too, has written a book entitled *Iranian and Diasporic Literature in the 21st Century: A Critical Study* (2013), in which he explores how the West has falsely generalized and stereotyped Iran.

While there exists an extensive literature on representations of post-revolutionary Iran by Iranian Americans (Bahramitash, 2005; Whitlock, 2007; Draznik, 2007; Karim & Rahimieh, 2008; Marandi, 2008; Marandi & Pirnajmuddin, 2009; Motlagh, 2008; Milani, 2013; Nazari, 2017), few works have specifically addressed the framing of the causes for the Iranian Revolution, and the Revolution itself. Thus, the present paper addresses the following

major frames: explaining the Revolution through the Western Modernity/Iranian Backwardness dichotomy, Revolution hijacked by the clerics, public disillusionment with the Revolution, Iranian women under the Islamic Republic, Quoting from "My Most Trusted Sources", War, Martyrdom and the Islamic Republic. The paper is also concerned with an extensive body of memoirs that cover a period between 1999 to 2020 to reflect upon the consistencies/inconsistencies of the discourse on post-revolutionary Iran.

1. 2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of Orientalism, or Western perceptions of the Orient, has been extensively discussed by numerous scholars (Tibawi, 1964; Said, 1978; Little, 1979; Ahmad, 1991; Sardar, 1999; Mcfie, 2000; Ashcroft, 2001; Turner, 2004). In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said elaborates on the imagery of the construction of the "Orient" since antiquity. The Orient was "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" (Said, 1978, p. 1). The Orientalist representation of revolutions in Islamic countries is not new (Patai, 1969; Hamady, 1960; Vatikiotis, 1972; Lewis, 1988, 2002; Huntington, 1996). In this body of literature, the Orientals are represented so inept that they cannot even aspire to fulfill the ambitions of revolution. For, according to Lewis (1998), only those countries that share "European or Europe-derived culture" can consummate a successful revolution that leads to "democracy". Therefore, it is claimed that while revolutions in the West give birth to democracy and freedom, in the Middle East, such movements are doomed to failure and lead to more tyranny and dictatorship. Writing on "Arab" revolutions, Vatikiotis (1972, pp. 8-9) maintains that: "All

revolutionary ideology is in direct conflict with man's rational, biological, and psychological makeup […]. Revolutionary ideology demands fanaticism from its adherents".

In his book, *What Went Wrong*, Bernard Lewis discusses what he perceived as the clash between Islam and modernity in the Middle East. According to Lewis (2002, p. 150), the dominant civilization today is Western and thus Western standards define modernity. He maintains that Orientals were suffering a cultural inability to overcome Islamic traditions that prevented neoliberal economics and Western technologies (Lewis, 2002, p. 150). The failure of revolutions in the Middle East is often simplified and reduced to the incompetent nature of the "Orientals" who are claimed to be unable to manage their affairs independent from Western "assistance". Thus, in such cases "Islamic Revolutions" are described as "experience of collective outbursts of enthusiasm but do not pursue patiently collective endeavors" (Hamady, 1960, p. 100), and when the excitement dies down, the "Orientals" lament and need to clean up the very mess they have created.

Said uses the concept of textual attitude to explain how literary works can generate knowledge in the Foucauldian sense, in which the schematic authority of a text is preferred to the disorientations of direct encounters (Said, 1978, p. 93). In Said's view, two situations favor textual attitude. The first one is when a human being confronts something relatively unknown, threatening and previously distant. In such cases, people, places, and experiences can effectively be described by a text or book, "so much so that the text acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes" (Said, 1978, p. 93). The second situation that encourages textual attitude is the appearance of success. According to Said, the success of a book for example, would encourage the reader to read more books by the same author; in addition, the author is believed

to the extent that his description becomes the reader's experience of reality. On the other hand, a book that has gained fame and success among audiences can provoke the production of a series of such books (Said, 1978, p. 95). Said also argues that, "the modern Orient participates in its own Orientalizing" (Said, 1985, p. 325). According to Sardar (1999, p. 85), from the late 1940s through to the early 1960s, a particular brand of scholars emerged as a new variety of indigenous Orientalism. The traces of such perceptions can be seen in the Iranian-American memoirs. In the narratives of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the tendency to Orientalize the events in concepts related to "revolution", "democracy", "freedom", "modernity" and the role of the West, is evident, as expressed by various Iranian-American writers in their memoirs.

1. 3. Methodology

This article applies framing analysis to evaluate the narrative of popular memoirs written by Iranian-Americans and identify the main themes that construct this narrative. A frame is the central organizing idea for making sense of events and suggesting what is at issue: "Framing is often considered as a necessary tool for reducing the complexity of an issue, given the constraints of their respective media related to news holes and airtime" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 12). Entman defines framing as: "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman, 2004, p. 5). Entman (1993, p. 53) also argues that framing selects "some aspects of a perceived reality" to enhance their salience "in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation". Frames define and

shape public events to citizens (Tuchman, 1978, p. iv), and work through selection, emphasis and exclusion (Gitlin, 1980). Framing is widely applied in media and news analysis, while the method could also be employed in all types of qualitative analysis involving text and images. Most framing models focus on politicians and journalists as the elite that shape frames and counter-frames, and thus influence how a specific problem or issue is perceived and judged by the public. Meanwhile, this study suggests that Iranian memoirists with specific interests and biases are another elite group that can potentially play such a role. Scholars of framing mention "different kinds of strategies such as metaphors, catchphrases, keywords, and stereotyped images to evoke special images or particular characteristics of an object" (Choi, 2010, p. 32). In the analysis of the selected memoirs, identifying such metaphors, keywords and stereotypes reveal an evident Orientalist approach to how Iran is portrayed. Some studies have in fact referred to Orientalism itself as a meta-frame within which other frames take shape and reproduce stereotypical images (Schmidt, 2014). The following section introduces and explains the main frames identified in the analysis of the selected memoirs. Instances of quotations that demonstrate the existence of certain themes and frames are numerous in each memoir, and so because of lack of space only a few examples are mentioned in each section.

2. Explaining the Revolution: Western Modernity vs. Iranian Backwardness

One of the main tasks that all so-called Iran experts have imposed on themselves for the past forty years has been explaining the unanticipated (for Westerners) and complex Islamic Revolution of 1979. The popular movement that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty,

and attracted extensive media attention to Iran has often been represented through the dichotomy of modernity vs. tradition. When discussing the effects of modernization in the selected memoirs, which is claimed as one of the major reasons for the 1979 revolution, modernity and development are represented as alien and incomprehensible for Middle Eastern dogmatic minds. Accordingly, the monarch's efforts to "modernize" the country are juxtaposed with the religiosity and traditionalism of the Iranian people. Secularism and a Western model of economic and social development are implied. For instance, Bahari states that during the Shah's reign, "New industries were developed, many Iranian students were educated in the West, and Iranian arts and culture were heavily influenced by Europe and America (Bahari, 2010, p. XVIII). He adds that "Many traditional and religious Iranians were alienated by this process of rash modernization" (Bahari, 2010, p. XVII). Davar Ardalan maintains that, "the Shah had tried to move toward modernization and secularization, but according to many people, it had been too quick and didn't give the religious people a chance to accept new ways of life" (Ardalan, 2007, p. 136). While Azadeh Moaveni highlights Shah's pro-Western policies, the stifling of the country's political dissent, and his economic policies (Moaveni, 2006, p. 7), maintaining that "the majority of Iranians [were] too traditional and too poor to appreciate the advent of bikinis and Christian Dior" (Moaveni, 2006, p. 7).

Meanwhile, some writers associate the Pahlavi regime with promoting democracy and increasing public welfare. According to Latifi (2005, p. 20), "he [Reza Shah] pushed for the elections and tried to create a legislative assembly, and overturned antiquated laws, like the one requiring women to be veiled in public. In a similar vein, Hakakian (2004, p. 5) writes, "the nation's annual growth rate was roughly double the average of the third world

countries, and per capita income was on the rise; so were student population and life expectancy.

Masih Alinejad (2018, p. 22) also talks about the "relative prosperity" and "thriving" of her family before the Revolution, and describes the Revolution as a backward process that brought about the "forced Islamification of the society". Though such claims may be valid about a specific social stratum of the Iranian population- including the memoirist, with often a privileged background- most Iranians were living in poverty before the Revolution. Comparing the statistics of pre and post-Revolutionary Iran with regard to basic infrastructure, human development, health care and education, especially in rural areas can be revealing (Salehi-Isfahani, 2019).

2. 1. Revolution Hijacked by the Clerics

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 proclaimed itself a "religious revolution" and was not primarily based on class issues (Keddie 1981; Arjomand 1988; Moghadam 1989; Ahady 1991; Moaddel 1993; Foran 1993). Moreover, many argue that the Iranian Revolution was not agrarian, but rather ideological in nature (Keddie, 1981). In a context when most revolutions tended to shift to the left and move toward secularism, returning to Islamic roots (known as the "return of Islam") questioned and challenged some of the major Western theoretical positions in social sciences, from Marxism to modernization theories.

A dominant approach in many Iranian-American memoirs is either to deemphasize the Islamic aspect of the 1979 Revolution, or to Orientalize the concept of the Islamic Revolution. Accordingly, either the religious motivations are downgraded, or are regularly depicted as extremist; it is thus claimed that fanatical acts were

carried out by those who gained political power. The Islamic revolutionary ideology is represented as in conflict with rationality and modernity, and is associated with different types of abnormalities that must be feared and shunned. Whereas some of the writer's express sympathy and support for the idea of a revolution (like Bahrampour and Esfandiari), they turn to staunch adversaries after its victory. According to many memoirists (Nafisi, 2003; Satrapi, 2003; Ḥakkakiyan, 2004; Moaveni, 2005; Bahari & Molloy, 2010; Kahlili, 2010), the Revolution is considered as a "deviant" one, as it established an Islamic Republic. The allegation that the revolution was hijacked by the clergy is raised and tinted with dramatic stories of violence. Most of the writers create an image, based on which the majority of Iranians are secular and despise the clergy or the Islamic aspect of the Revolution.

The writers' claims about people's motives for the revolution often display their distorted or biased understanding of the event. Nafisi (2009, p. 213) writes about the "hysteria and outrage" of the revolution and claims: "Although secular forces had initiated the protests, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were by now gaining prominence in Iran" (Nafisi, 2009, p. 210). Moaveni (2005, p. 12) states: "Like so many thousands Khaleh Farzi had been drawn to the revolutionary street protests in Tehran without a clear sense of their destination, without any inkling that would explode the world of which she was so fond". In a cartoon image that depicts "the day he [shah] left" (Moaveni, 2005, p. 42) Satrapi (2003) illustrates no bearded men or veiled women among the participants of the event, while in later pages when the Islamic Republic is established, they are associated with extremism and violence. Moreover, Satrapi's uncle states that "the revolution is a leftist revolution and the republic wants to be called Islamic" (Satrapi , 2003, p. 60).

Many authors represent the Islamic Revolution as an irrational, backward and regressive movement. This backwardness is claimed to exist both among the authorities, and the public. Kahlili (2010, p. 45) attempts to create an impression that Ayatollah Khomeini's appeal to the public was instinctive, rather than rational, "his appeal was not intellectual. It was primal". Hakakian (2004, p. 116) associates the Revolution with "rage" and "anger". Satrapi's mother states that, in post-Revolutionary Iran, "you'll have to trade your car for a camel" (Satrapi , 2003, p.75). According to Nafisi (2003, p. 262), "What differentiated this revolution from the other totalitarian revolutions of the twentieth century was that it came in the name of the past".

Most of the writers mention the Shah's dictatorship and despotism and the brutality of SAVAK, poverty, and the lack of political freedom (Bahari, 2010, p. XVII, Hakakian, 2004, p. 6; Ardalan, 2007, p. 135; Rachlin, 2006, p. 206; Moaveni, 2005, p. 7; Esfandiar, 2009, p. 45; Kahlili, 2010, p. 45; Bahrampour, 1999, p. 111). However, the overall image is a picture of pre-revolutionary bliss juxtaposed with dark and brutal post-revolutionary Iran; what Nazari (2017, p. 283) has referred to as "romanticisation of pre-revolutionary Iran coupled with demonisation of the post-revolution era".

2. 2. Public Disillusionment: The Islamic Republic on the Verge of Collapse

The depiction of the Islamic Republic faced with a disillusioned public and on the verge of collapse has existed since the first year of the Revolution, and Iranian-American memoirists often contribute to, and actively reproduce this image. The works usually depict a "liberal" "secular" and "modern" society that is willing to

overthrow the "backward authoritarian" Islamic Republic. The core argument is often that the new generation is not interested in ideology, or does not invoke Islam like the older generation did, and thus favors a Western secular form of government.

The idea that the public was disillusioned in the early months or years after the Revolution is expressed by many Iranian-American memoirists. According to Nafisi (2003, p. 211), "it took a few months before the disillusionment set in". In a similar vein, Kahlili (2010, p. 62) claims that only "a year and four months" after the revolution when "a million devotees met Khomeini at the airport […] many Iranians were hoping for the overthrow of his regime". Saberi (2010, p. 102) refers to inaccurate predictions regarding the collapse of the Islamic Republic, stating that "Despite predictions that it would collapse, the new regime had survived". Although the preservation of the stateis claimed through coercion rather than consent, and opposition or challenges are "ruthlessly" crushed (Saberi, 2010, p. 102).

One of the examples often used by some of the memoirists as a sign of public disillusionment with the Islamic Republic is the turnout of elections. When talking about the first referendum, Satrapi's father says, "Do you realize how ignorant our people are? The elections were faked and they believe the results: 99.99%! As for me, I don't know a single person who voted for the Islamic Republic" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 62). Kahlili writes about the presidential election that was held six years later in 1985, "By this time, Ali Khamenei had gained a second term as president in an election that saw stunningly few Iranians participate because they believed that the democratic process was a sham" (Kahlili, 2010, p. 227). Twenty years later, talking about the 2005 Iranian presidential election, Saberi (2010, p. 260) states that, "Many Iranians later told me they hadn't bothered to vote". Jason Rezaian

(2019, p. 100) also makes a contradictory statement that due to "a collective rejection of Islamic Republic politics as usual, many Iranians had decided to give electoral participation one more shot".

On the other hand, if the public participates in elections, it is claimed that they are forced to do so, "Even in these elections there are rumors that they'll check your passports and won't let you leave if you don't vote" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 318), a claim that reveals the author's ignorance on the issue, since in fact, voters do not get a stamp on their passports in Iran. Similar claims are made when people participate in pro-government demonstrations in Iran. Saberi (2010, p. 104) says she had heard reports "of Iranians being bused in from rural areas or receiving financial incentives for showing up". Nafisi (2003, p. 105) claims that those who participated in demonstrations against the US were "given food and money", were "bussed in daily from the provinces and villages", and "didn't even know where America was, and sometimes thought they were actually" going there. Ironically, when the participation of Iranians in the elections is acknowledged, it is used as a symbol of public resentment and dissatisfaction with the Islamic Republic. For instance, the idea that Khatami's election as Iran's President resulted from de-ideologized, disillusioned nation with a "clerical regime", and therefore, Iranians' struggle for a Western-style democracy is very popular. For Esfandirai (2009, p. 95), Khatami's era was, "when the possibility of fundamental change seemed real and when Iranians believed, for a brief moment, that they could take charge of their own lives and government.". When, in the 2009 presidential election, Bahari (2010, p. 20) sees many young Iranians who were willing to participate in the election, he concludes, "They [young Iranian generation] were tired of thirty years of the stringent rules of the Islamic Republic, and surely they were angry".

2. 3. Iranian Women under the Islamic Republic

One omnipresent aspect of nearly all memoirs on Iran is the issue of women's rights, as well as the taken for granted claim that the revolution has led to draconian measures against them and their freedom in society. Many memoirs published about Iran are in fact written by women, demonstrating an undeniable thirst among Western audiences to read the often-sensationalized accounts that depict a society that is bent on crushing the will of women and girls in a sometimes sadistic manner. This specific framing is part of the overall depiction of the pre-Revolutionary Iran as a modern and progressive society-sometimes with quick references to the regime's deficiencies. Such references are often used as a semantic move to imply the objectiveness of the author, with a Shah who had hastened the process of modernization by unveiling women, and promoting literacy and employment among them. This is juxtaposed with religious backwardness and the repression of women under a "clerical regime" of the Islamic Republic.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi (2003, p. 261) claims that "when I was growing up, in the 1960s, there was little difference between my rights and the rights of women in Western democracies". Haleh Esfandiari (2009 pp. 41-42) states, that women's employment grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s and that due to the activities of Women's Organization of Iran, which mainly focused on working-class women, family welfare centers were established all over the country. Women were provided with literacy classes, legal advice, and family planning clinics. Alinejad (2018, p. 46) claims that the Revolution was "many steps backward" and that in the Islamic Republic, "being born a woman is like having a disability". Rachlin (2007, p. 238) maintains that with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the small gains women had

begun under the Shah were set back and that, "now all women were required to wear chadors". Esfandiari (2009, p. 43) also writes about the clerics who "sought to undo as many of our accomplishments as they could" by suspending family protection law, retirement of working women and lowering the marriage age for girls to nine.

Contrary to Nafisi's (2003, p. 167) claim about "women's overwhelming objection", Farzaneh Milani (1992, p. 37) asserts that "not only did many refute to take a firm stand against forced veiling in the early stages of its implementation; on the contrary they reprimanded and condemned those who openly objected to it". While the writers claim access to the private life of many Iranian women, their narratives are based on their own limited personal perspectives (Bahramitash, 2005). Thus, the writers cannot be taken as representatives of average Iranian women, even though in their memoirs "they are invested in describing the lives of various women under the Islamic Republic through their stories" (Rastegar, 2006, p. 108). According to Rastegar, their representation of Iran, if accepted as accurate, can be considered a description of life of specific social strata of Iranian women in pre and post-Revolutionary Iran.

Many Iranian-American memoirists represent the veil as the symbol of suppression and they see themselves as the champions to defeat it. Their accounts and dramatized stories of their adventures and heroic resistance seem appealing to the reading public in the West. Latifi states that in post-revolutionary Iran "if a girl so much as licked an ice-cream cone on the street, it was ground for arrest" (Latifi, 2005, p. 56). Bahrampour (2010, p. 207) heard that in Iran "women [are] whipped for wearing sunglasses, women raped in jail and then stoned for their resulting loss of virginity. Also, Alinejad mentions the odd case of schoolgirls standing faced to a wall after

school hours while waiting for their bus, to avoid contact with boys from a nearby school. Even when the author of the memoir is male, they do not fail to fit in a few powerful sentences on the deprivation of women in Iranian society. Jason Rezaian, while describing his sudden awareness upon imprisonment in Iran that he desperately wants to have a daughter, quickly concludes that this desire means he can't make Iran his home. He realizes that "there was no way I was going to be able to grow a family with Yegi in a society that is segregated along gender lines and systematically intolerant in so many other ways" (Rezaian, 2019, p. 33).

The dichotomy of the West as women's liberator and the Islamic Republic as the oppressor of women, and dividing people into religious vs. secular, veiled vs. unveiled, educated in the West vs. those who were educated in Iran are among major frames in the memoirs. Arguments and stories consistently have such implications; for instance, in the representation of hijab, sexual behavior of the public at large, and so-called Westernized vs. traditional Iranian men and women are significantly stressed. Thus, models are being made and conveyed that contrast "us" with "them" by emphasizing "our" modernity, tolerance, intellect, and "their" sexual deviancy, backwardness, illiteracy and, ultimately, threat.

2. 4. Quoting from "My Most Trusted Sources"

As the Western audience is mainly uninformed about post-Revolutionary Iran, the so -called "facts" and sources related to the Islamic Republic can be easily manipulated or fabricated. Significantly the authors claim to be the voice of the "silent majority of Iranians" inside Iran. Most of the memoirists represent themselves as "authentic insiders", as Iran experts, academicians,

and journalists. Such “inside” narrations create an aura of authenticity and a certain sense of reliability. Hakakian (2004, p. 13) claims that she provides “the ‘insider’s fact, information only natives are privy to”. Moaveni claims that she knows “more about Shiism and Iranian poetry than half of the girls my age” (Moaveni, 2005, p. 108).

Kahlili, a self-proclaimed “CIA-affiliated” agent inside Revolutionary Guards of Iran, opens his memoir with an encompassing disclaimer: “This is a true story of my life as a CIA agent in the Revolutionary Guards of Iran” (Khalili, 2010: Disclaimer). However, he claims that to protect himself and his family “it was necessary to change all the names (except for officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran) and alter certain events, chronology, circumstances, and places”. Thus, while the readers are presented with altered and distorted information about people, places, time and incidents, his claims are taken as “a vivid first-person narrative of how the zealots of the Islamic republic created what has become a nightmare for the Iranian people” (Ignatious, 2010). Kahlili’s a *Time To Betray*, has won several awards (in two categories of memoir and non-fiction) and is a part of JCITA[1]’s Iranian Program’s readings. Despite his claims regarding being a member of IRGC, he seems ignorant of some essential functions, features, and incidents related to this organization. For instance, the author claims to have witnessed the seizure of the U.S. embassy in November 1979, and points to the IRGC as being behind the takeover, yet in reality, the Revolutionary Guards was not involved in the seizure and was not even an organized entity at that time (Khalili, 2010, p. 44; p. 47).

Maziyar Bahari (2010, p. 36) uses the same method about his

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"credible source". In the second chapter of his memoir, the readers are familiarized with a character named Amir, who had worked in the Ministry of Interior and had extensive connections with "the highest-ranking members of the Iranian government". Bahari (2010, p. 36) describes Amir as his "most trusted source" and an insider who has access to and provides him (and the readers) with detailed information about the secret activities of the Revolutionary Guards (Bahari, 2010, pp. 40-43). Amir also yields information on the supposed election rigging that he claims was pre-planned by the Guards (Bahari, 2010, p. 38; p. 41; p. 42; p. 43). However, at the end of the memoir, Amir turns out to be "a composite character," who has no actual existence (Bahari, 2010, p. 331). In his acknowledgement, which appears at the end of the book, Bahari states the reason for such fabrication "The readers can understand that I had to create the composite character of Amir to show the differences of opinion within the Islamic Republic establishment" (2010, p. 331). While many readers do not bother to read the acknowledgement, those who read it are shocked at the end of the book because a substantial amount of information provided by a supposed "most trusted source" (2010, p. 36) turns out to be unverifiable.

The same method is applied by Azar Nafisi, who, in the author's note at the beginning of her memoir, states that: "aspects of characters and events in this story have been changed mainly to protect individuals […] I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and distinguishing them perhaps even from themselves, changing and interchanging facts of their lives so that their secrets are safe" (Nafisi, 2003, Author's Note)

2. 5. War, Martyrdom and the Islamic Republic

Representations of the Islamic Republic as a violent, militant and oppressive religious regime that abuses ideology and religious rhetoric to manipulate the Iranian people, and an irrational public that can be easily manipulated, have become a powerful discourse and tool of "analysis" among many Iranian-American memoirists. Recurring allegations, such as using "human wave attacks" and "plastic keys to heaven" distorts historical facts about the Iran-Iraq war and attempts to reduce it into a meaningless and unnecessary adventure. The fact that most of the memoirists often looked at the war from an "outsider perspective" explains the misinformation and hyperbolic fabrications. For example, Azar Nafisi (2003, p. 209) claims that the Iranians were the "perpetrators" of the war. She asks rhetorically, "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?" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 159). Satrapi (2003, p. 101), contends that the Islamic Republic actually "admitted that the survival of the regime depended on the war".

Generally, the memoirists often have an "outsider" view toward the Iran-Iraq war; either they were not in Iran during the war (like Esfandiari and Bahrampour), or they were not closely involved with it (like Nafisi, Satrapi, Bahari and Ardalan). Nafisi, who considers the American Civil War as "righteous" and admires Henry James for his courage (Nafisi, 2003, p. 214), explains how she had joined her students with an "air of jubilation" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 211) in mocking another student who had lost his life defending Iran (Nafisi, 2003, p. 211; also, see Satrapi, 2003, p. 97). Others, such as Ardalan and Bahrampour, make absurd claims about the war recruitment. Ardalan (2007, p. 201) explained that

her uncle was worried about her sons being drafted for war, as "they were fair-skinned, blond-haired, blue-eyed. […] his two oldest children stood out as 'American looking' in a sea of black-haired, olive-skinned, brown-eyed Iranians. Bahrampour's mother fears that if her son goes back to Tehran, "they'd see he doesn't speak Farsi and they'd send him to the front line to explode the mines" (Bahrampour, 1999, p. 201).

The claim that the Islamic Republic mobilized the nation with indoctrination campaigns, such as manipulating the concept of martyrdom, rewarding soldiers with "plastic keys to heaven," and using "human wave attacks" are salient themes in many Iranian-American memoirs. Apparently, the widespread rumor in the Western discourse regarding the Iran-Iraq war, about the "keys" as well as "human wave attacks" serves to depict Iran as irrational and thus dehumanized large numbers of Iranians and represent them as people who are ready to die for "erotic delights" or out of sheer fanaticism. Such discourses disregard or cover up uncomfortable historical facts.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi (2003, p. 75; p. 159) wrote about ten to sixteen-year-old Iranian soldiers, who she claimed had "keys to a heaven where they could finally enjoy all the pleasures from which they have abstained in life". Satrapi (2003, p. 99) refers to "plastic keys painted in gold" and that "they told the boys that if they went to war and were lucky enough to die this key would get them into heaven". To reinforce stereotypical clichés of Oriental sensuality and absurdity, the writers claim that the soldiers were fooled with promises of paradise, in which "there will be plenty of food, women and houses made of gold and diamonds" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 100, see also Nafisi, 2003, p. 211). Apparently, when referring to the keys to paradise, the writers are somehow confusing soldiers' metallic identification tags with

Shaikh Abbass Qumi's popular prayer book entitled *Mafatih al-Janan* or "Keys to Paradise"; a strange case of "willful ignorance," where the authors insist on repeating and reproducing an unsubstantiated claim.

Furthermore, the claim that "young kids" were killing themselves for "a better life" in the hereafter is made to emphasize the irrationality of such acts, and stress the evilness of the Iranian government. Satrapi claims, "they [Islamic Republic] hypnotize them [kids] and just toss them into battle. Absolute carnage" (Satrapi, 2003, p.101). She adds, "Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks" (Satrapi, p. 102). Roxana Saberi (2010, p. 5) claims that, "many Iranians were lured to the front lines of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s with the promise that if they died, they would become martyrs and go to heaven. According to Kahlili (2010, p. 85), "the Basijis sacrificed themselves by walking through minefields to clear a path for the Guards or by tying bombs to their bodies and throwing themselves under Iraqi tanks to blow them up. This emphasizes the danger of such an alleged mentality, as well as its devastating consequences for the "civilized world".

3. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the framing analysis of the selected memoirs, fundamental misconceptions or deliberate distortion of events related to post-revolutionary Iran are common in many Iranian-American memoirs. Factual errors and hyperbolic, baseless claims that are not supported by verifiable evidence make the representation of post-Revolution Iran very problematic and detached from reality. The main misconceptions identified through this analysis include:

- The Islamic republic is hijacked by the clergies, while most of the Iranian people favor a secular state.
- The political system of the Islamic Republic is fragile and on the verge of collapse.
- Elections are fraudulent and the public are reluctant to participate in political activities.
- The Islamic Republic has suppressed women by the imposition of Sharia and hijab.
- The Islamic Republic mobilized the nation during the Iran-Iraq war with indoctrination campaigns, such as manipulating the concept of martyrdom.
- The reason for the revolution was the monarch's efforts to "modernize" the country.

The writers portray an Iranian society that is divided between secularized and disillusioned Iranians, and anti-modern, violent, Islamist groups, backed and organized by the theocratic government. The possibility that at least some segments of the Iranian society do in fact support the political system is practically denied, leading readers to conclude that Iranian people are hostage to leaders of such a theocratic government.

Often the perception of Iran and the way in which it is represented by some Iranian-American memoirists substantially differ from Iran's social reality. This inconsistency is partly because most of the writers left Iran over decades ago (like Bahrampour, Ardalan, Nafisi, Satrapi, Bahari, Esfandiari), while some of them were not even born in Iran (Moaveni and Saberi). Many writers have little contact with Iranians inside the country or their interaction is usually limited to those who have similar political views, while presenting a strong and undisputed claim to authenticity and authority on all issues related to Iran. This makes

the understanding and the representation of the Iranian society significantly partial, and in many cases distorted. These memoirs often "appear unfamiliar to contemporary Iranians, and familiar and welcome to contemporary American readers" (Whitlock, 2006, p. 165). In the absence of alternative voices, accounts and narratives of those who are unsympathetic or even hostile toward the Iranian Revolution have gained special authority and credibility.

Most of the narratives used "stories" that focused on usually negative characteristics, and function to further an argument to persuade the readers about the abnormality of the "Other" (the Islamic Republic/the clergy/the religious men/the veiled women/the over-sensualized public, etc.). The writers' authorial framing encourages readers to view such accounts in the light of a documentary, although most of the events are conveyed as rumors that are "heard" from someone else; yet such rumors are dealt with and presented as facts. This is significant, since the Framing Theory asks the question of who and what can frame, in order for frames to be effective. Scholars have argued that "elite actors," including writers of literature, are the ones that possess the ability to produce effective frames and thus influence public opinion (Schmidt, 2014, p. 125). Authors of memoirs attain credibility through their claim of personal experience, which makes their audience more receptive towards their framing (Schmidt, 2014). Such biased depictions lead to the constant reproduction of Iran in an Orientalist light. Accordingly, Iran is portrayed as strange, irrational and, ultimately, threatening, a demonized Other or an entity that cannot be accepted as normal, and thus must constantly be met with policies reserved for security threats and enemies. Through constant repetition, this particular framing becomes "commonsense"; limiting the range of "permissible thinking", and as Kumar (2010, p. 255) has demonstrated for the case of

representations of Islam, the "Orientalist logic" becomes taken for granted. Such a perception means that Iranian authors of memoirs, rather than acting as possible intermediaries who facilitate cultural dialogue and improve perceptions, act as parts of an existing industry that reproduces similar age-old Orientalist stereotypes by producing what politicians and the general public want to hear and consume (willful ignorance). In this way, they prevent any positive change in the negative perception of the American public toward Iran.

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