(RE)PRESENTING THIRD-WORLD IRANIAN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes the production of 'average third-world woman' as the one who leads an essentially 'truncated life based on her feminine gender and being third world.' When the mentioned statement is analyzed in the light of Muslim women, with their status reduced to the essentialized model of Third-World women, these individual's voice are silenced, their histories erased, and their mode of resistance is ignored. Centering on autobiographies, particularly the ones written by Iranians settled in the West, the paper addresses the feminist concerns of these Third-World women on the specific forms of resistance, organizations and negotiations by them in the First-World. Autobiographies, in this vein, attempt to resist cultural imperialism by significantly de-centering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. The objective of these autobiographies is not merely to document one's history of struggle or consciousness, but how they are recorded, received and disseminated is of paramount importance. These Iranian diasporic women's life-narratives, thus, reveal not only their own personal and private lives, but also testify the socio-political and national history of their native country, thereby proving their sense of empowerment, both socially and politically.

***Key-Words**: Iranian diaspora, life-narratives, Third-World Women, Western-feminists, resistance-writing*

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People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave. (Shakur 262)

This statement by Assata Shakur, when analyzed in the light of female Iranian migrants settled across the world, brings forth their marginalized existence. It highlights how these diasporic women's status is reduced to an essentialised Third-World model, thereby, silencing their voice, erasing their histories, and ignoring their resistance. Autobiographies and other life-narratives, in this vein, play a significant role of resisting and de-centering hegemonic histories. These life-narratives are not merely tied to one's personal misery and collective trauma, but also show awareness of the history and politics while taking consideration the way their testimonies are viewed, interpreted and institutionally located. Thus, the central concern of this paper is to address the specific forms of resistance and negotiations offered by the Iranian diasporic women in the West.

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Chandra Talpade Mohanty uses 'Third World' for postcolonial countries, a highly contested and maligned term. While condoning this preference for the term 'Third World', Mohanty justifies how the term has come to loosely associated with alliance among the people of colours in their struggles world-wide. She states:

> Third World refers to the colonized, neocolonized or decolonized countries whose economic and political structures have been deformed within colonial process . . . Thus, the term does not merely indicate a hierarchical culture and economic relationship between the "first" and "third" world countries; it intentionally foregrounds a history of colonization and contemporary relationships of structural domination between first and third world peoples. (Ix-x)

As the mentioned excerpt suggests, the term Third-World is a highly debated concept. While it has come to define and designate the experiences and struggles of diverse groups of women across the world serving as tool of their empowerment, the appropriation of the term also results in depoliticizing and flattening all the internal hierarchies among these women. Kum Kum Sangari notes how the term, other than designating specific geographical territory, also implies imaginary spaces. Sangari writes that Third-World is 'a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single "underdeveloped" terrain' (217). The usage of Third World in Western feminism has been a topic of wide criticism. Mohanty argues:

> What seems to constitute "women of color" or "third world" as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is third world women's oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialistic structures that constitutes our political commonality. (7)

She further contends that the appropriation of the notion of 'third world woman as a singular monolithic subject,' by Western feminism results in a 'discursive colonization' (51). Thus, both Mohanty and Sangari is critical of the ways where 'Third-World' is used by the West as a means of latent economic and cultural colonization. Thus, life-narratives, while they portray personal accounts of self-witnessing, could in fact be read as cultural documents. The concern here is not just the act of testifying one's consciousness and one's history of struggle, but the way they are written, recoded and disseminated remains imperative in the assertion of the 'selves'.

Autobiographies and memoirs by Iranian women settled in the West, especially post-1979 Iranian Revolution, such as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* (2004), and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005), discloses the way their personal lives are intertwined with the political and national histories of their countries. These narratives, in turn, serve as a means of establishing their social and political empowerment. In the "Introduction" to *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood*,

Marjane Satrapi speaks of why politicizing her memoirs is of utmost importance to her identity. She states:

> Since then [Iranian Revolution], this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know this image is far from truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* is important to me. (2)

Evident from the mentioned excerpt, it could be observed how Iranian women, traditionally relegated to the domain of the private, now renders themselves visible by bearing testimony to the sufferings in the homeland and trauma of exile at their host country. Performing the enabling action of resisting silence, these life-narratives then become the means of speaking back, and thereby impacting changes. For instance, the title of Azadeh Moaveni's autobiography 'Lipstick Jihad' is suggestive of, at one level, defiance against the Iranian state where cosmetics and other beauty products were considered perilous to Islamic code of conduct. Satrapi's *Persepolis* also narrates an instance of Marji's utter confusion after her home-coming in Iran regarding the Islamic morals which condemned even the profession of a hairdresser, and considered it equivalent to a courtesan (114).

At another level, these narratives are also indicative of how Iranian women are far from the stereotyped-monosyllabic representations as depicted by the Western media. Moaveni in her memoir recounts the way Khaleh Zahra portrayed her tangled identity. She would quite consciously choose sheer fabrics fringed with lace, thereby turning her compulsory *hijab* into nothing less than delicate slips. Khaleh Zahra's Islamic covering, as Moaveni recalls, had an effect more alluring than a pair of T-shirts and shorts (84). Similarly, Nafisi describes two photographs of her students in stark contrasts to each other. While first one portrays her students dressed in head scarves and black robes, the second one depicts the same group of women without their coverings with occasional splashes of colours separating one woman from the other (4), a reflection in Satrapi's narrative as well, which she termed as their 'schizophrenic' existence (*Persepolis: The Story of a Return* 151). Thus, while autobiography allows the readers an access to the author's private life of marginal existence, the genre also opens up a realm where the readers are co-opted into the author's resistance. This unwinds a process of potential recognition of similarity between the author and its readers, between the Third-World women

and the Western-host culture at large.

Thus, writing memoirs in effect is the vital urge to reclaim their past, and restore their identities. Since they were never given an option to speak in the past, writing life-narratives then becomes an effective means of publicizing their private lives. Traditionally confined in private places, these Middle-Eastern women make themselves visible to the public world by bearing testimony to the struggles and sufferings endured by them. These narratives, thereby, serve as a means of rebelling against the dominant order, breaking the gender code, and thereby impacting changes. Conway (7-8) affirms that these autobiographies and memoirs should be viewed 'as conscious acts of rebelling. Writing and publishing one's life history was moving beyond secret rebellion to announce one's reasons for breaking gender codes.'

However, there is a tremendous sense of mutual incompatibility that seems to be existent between the Western Feminists as well the Islamic Feminists as a result of the ways the Feminists inform their own groups. On one hand, the Western feminism is based on the Western values and ideology that widely differ from that of the Islamist and Arabic traditions. In fact, most of the conflicts arise because of the Western feminism's resistance to its pre-conceived notions of superiority over other forms. On the other hand, the Islamic feminism focuses on women's negotiation of their selfhood by grounding themselves in relation to the religious and national communities. They, in turn, challenge the Liberal feminism's focus of individualism. Being a Third-World citizen in the First-World, the way these Iranian diasporic women translate and negotiate the Orientalist and Islamist discourses, while regulating them into their lives as a politics of everyday, is quintessential to their agenda. Said in *Orientalism* (1978) maintains how the ideology ingrained in Orientalism is fashioned by a sense of historical envy forged by Europe along with its fear and hatred for the 'infidel', and additionally with a sense of superiority over the Islamic 'other'. Even the romanticizing and valuation of the East/Orient is part of 'Othering' them (40). Thus, the societies with Islamic practices as their dominant belief-systems are held with contempt, thereby, sustaining a homogenous portrayal of them while disregarding their regional and cultural differences. Religion, mostly viewed in societies as one of the many institutions, is however regarded as an overriding influence when it comes to Islam. This, thereby, acts as a supplement in feeding the Orientalist assumption regarding the role of Islam as a hegemonic religion in the lives of Iranian women.

Moreover, what occupies the crucial position is that some of the Muslim women's memoirs are twisted to meet the political demands of the West. In the process, the authors, whose agenda in memoirs was to diamante the Orientalist discourses, end up reinstating them. Western readers in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, as well as 1979 American Hostage Crisis in Iran and post-1979 Iranian Revolution have been bombarded with negative images of veiled women and religious fanatics. Furthermore, Western media has now become fraught with varied discourses, depicting atrocities in the Middle-Eastern societies in a quite appalling manner. Media has, thus, made liberal usage of the Orientalist depictions of Iranian women, rendering them trapped in *hijabs* and *harems*, in militantly crazed society. This had resulted in garnering a particular voyeuristic interest in Middle-Eastern autobiographies among the Western readers.

Therefore, these authors gets caught in a double-bind—of feeding the Orientalist-Western imagery while writing about their oppressed selves, or facing the crisis of their life-narratives being rendered insignificant and non-existent in the publishing industry if they threaten to destabilize the subservient Orientalist position projected onto Muslim women. Therefore, while Satrapi's Persepolis was rejected by many publishers before it was finally published by L'Associaiton, Nafisi's *Lolita in Tehran* was accused of being an exemplification of 'Neo Orientalist narrative' (6) by Fatemeh Keshavarz. Keshavarz contends that Nafisi's selective exaggerated accounts of life in Iran reinforce the already existing stereotype of the Iranians across the world. She further comments that such distorted images perpetuated by these Iranian New-Orientalist narratives hinder the intercultural exchange (6). Keshavarz points out that how *Lolita in Tehran* presents teaching of Western literary works to students in Iran as an act of groundbreaking. Quoting Nafisi's statement, 'we [Iranians] lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary work (*RLT* 25),' as far from truth (20), Keshavarz further illustrates:

> *RLT*'s narration left many holes in the tapestry, depicting a culture peopled with pretty monsters who cared only about religion, and in a superficial way. No wonder hearing Muslim names wiped smiles of people's faces. (21)

However, if they write about resolute and resistant Muslim women, their writing is considered inconsequential. Therefore, Satrapi's graphic-autobiographies, portraying the strong-willed Marji, hemmed in the tyrannical world of Fundamentalists, are politically and culturally quite engaged yet it remains acutely conflicted. Caught in the divide between exile and home,

West and East, the life-narratives of Satrapi and the like is made all the more complicated. As Mohanty notes, the Western readers and the mainstream peer reviewed process privileges books that stabilize the victimization of the 'Muslim woman' image, and documents villainous acts of Muslim men. These images are then fashioned into prototypes of Eastern savagery whereby Muslim women are counterfeited to act as 'museum of horrors' supplicating the Western/Orientalist representations. Any failure from the depiction of that image renders such narratives inauthentic (Mohanty 70). While highlighting the ubiquity and dynamism of contemporary Middle-Eastern life-writings, Whitlock suggests:

> [Memoirs] can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard. . . But it is a "soft" weapon because it is easily co-opted into propaganda. In modern democratic societies propaganda is frequently not the violent and coercive imposition of ideas but a careful manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere and a management of information in the engineering of consent. Life narratives can be complicit in these processes. (5-3)

The Orientalist perception regarding Muslim women fueled the idea that the motive behind venture of European colonizer was to enlighten and not to exploit, and to salvage women from religious oppressions. Thus, Western feminism centered on emancipation of Muslim women from the Islamic theocracy. Khan notes Rana Kabbani's argument where she cites how Orient was largely considered an illicit space of sexual gratification offered by women whose statuses were nothing more than convenient chattels. This status of 'loose' woman designated to the Middle-Eastern Muslim women was something forbidden in the Victorian households. Khan further brings to attention Malek Alloula's compilation of postcards and commentaries, befittingly exposing the French colonizers fixation with unveiled-colonial Algerian women's body. Alloula's postcards brimming with semi-clad and nude bodies of Oriental-Muslim women are symbolic of not merely violence, but also opprobrium that aims towards stripping these women from their culture and dignity. Princess Jasmine from Alladin, the 1994 feature film, illustrates another apt example of the easily available, eroticized Muslim women. Moreover, the 1979 Revolution and the American Hostage Crisis have further supplemented these exotic images for the Iranians in the West (Khan 309).

Thus, the entire discourse surrounding the Western media and Western feminist's construction of the idea of Third-World women depicts the lives of Muslim women, Iranian in this case, as entirely determinant of the Islamic ideology. Their lives, as portrayed by some of the antagonistic Western feminists, is constructed as uninfluenced by the global socio-economic and political relationships. Julie Stephens is critical of the feminist scholarship that speaks for 'real women', and not the idealized-mythic women of discourse around nationalism. She claims that feminism often ends up colliding as well as colluding with Orientalism in its attempt to represent a sovereign female-subject (92-131). Thus, feminist writings, in its pursuit of granting subjectivity, confer subject-status only to women fulfilling the criteria in consistency with the author/writer's own feminist position. In the process, it ends up valorizing some while objectifying and oppressing others.

These women alienated by the Orientalist discourse, when they turn to Islam, often ends up facing Islamist attempts at containing them with the rigidity of sexist structures, as evident from the mentioned narratives. Thus, Islam and particularly, the current politicized views of identity along with the Orientalist representation of Muslim women in the First-World presents two positions for these Iranian women in the diasporic communities of the West. These two subject positions conferred on them, in turn, acts as two contradictory axes of political implications—of aversion and desire. Both these poles essentialize, and thereby, trivialize the 'ideal Muslim Woman', reducing her to the same set of fixed icons and symbols (Khan 310-311). Thus, life-narratives by Iranian diasporic writers in the West often deal with the antagonistic polar-forces of the East and the West, and the cultural intersection between the two. This tension is well portrayed in Reading Lolita in Tehran, Persepolis, Lipstick Jihad and so on.

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