Towards an Auto-Orientalist Reading of Iran: Case Studies of Two American Memoirs

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In the Name of Allah
the Most Merciful
the Most Beneficent
Dedicated to my lovely parents
Abstract

This study offers analysis of Iranian-Americans’ writings across the memoir genre, with the focus on the two well-received memoirs, Azadeh Moaveni’s *Honeymoon in Tehran* (2009) and Jasmin Darznik’s *The Good Daughter: A Memoir of My Mother’s Hidden Life* (2011), in order to contribute to the on-going discussions on auto-Orientalism and rewriting Iran and Iranians by the Iranian-American authors. I examine how the two diasporic Iranian women writers represent the Iranians and their conditions in their country of origin, with the focus on self-representation. By studying the two Iranian women's memoirs, I argue how these writers reproduce a picture of Iranians and their position in the authors’ local and global communities. Therefore, my focus is to explore how they might promote or diverse Orientalist understanding of the American’s majority towards Iranians. The current thesis utilizes qualitative content analysis as the methodology of the work. It also draws on the concept of Orientalism developed by Edward Said, and adapts the model of auto-Orientalism offered by Martina Koegeler. The study’s examination reveals that Darznik’s narration of her memoir is rather more in accordance with a strategic auto-Orientalism, in which the author seems to rearticulate and subvert the mainstream American Orientalist tropes. It also indicates that Moaveni’s text appears to fall in the essentialist auto-Orientalism category, in which the author perpetuates and promotes the very same Orientalist understanding of Iran and Iranians.
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Table 2. Codes and Themes Extracted from Honeymoon in Tehran (with the focus on Iran and Iranians) ....................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction

General Background

American Orientalism emerged mainly after World War II in which the United States took the place of France and Britain, the former superpowers. With this respect, its new leading role in the East took Muslim and Arabs into consideration, especially for academics and researchers. Subsequently, Easterners, particularly Muslims and Arabs, became the stereotypes in American cultural, academic, and political world. The American contribution towards Orientalism is indeed a specialty in a more practical form of Orientalism. The Orientalist, as a trained social scientist, should in fact apply his science to the Orient (Said, 2003).

Said puts forward the argument that one of the aspects of the American attention to the Orient is emergence of those Americans who write on the Orient (Said, 2003). However, among different genres, memoir has been one of the most popular literary styles. James Atlas points out the significance of life writing genre in the Americans’ life. He believes the genre has provided opportunity for new voices who hope to share their real stories with others. He argues that memoir has been able to take the place of novel, as the most successful literary genre (as cited in Motlagh, 2008). Moreover, a number of American memoirs have been written on the Orient and in particular Iran; since it has been one of the most significant countries in the Orientalist discourse, especially after 1979 Islamic Revolution.

My investigation into American memoirs written on Iran proves them to be mostly the result of Americans’ presence in pre-Revolution era. Some of those Americans had significant military, political, or commercial positions at the time, and some others happened to live in Iran for some years as the result of marrying an Iranian partner. Although many memoirs have been written about Iran by the Americans, except two books, almost none of them have
gained popularity among the Americans. One of them is Mahmoody’s *Not without My Daughter* (1991) which can be regarded as the foot-stone of writing memoirs about Iran. The book, which is an example of a victim genre (revenge genre), has had 46 editions so far, and a film with the same name was released in 1991 as an adaptation of the memoir. The second American memoir which achieved popularity is *Argo: How the CIA and Hollywood Pulled off the Most Audacious Rescue in History* (Mendez & Baglio, 2012). Generally speaking, despite the similarities of the American-written memoirs’ storyline and themes with what one can see in the Iranian-American memoirs on Iran, the popularity of the latter is by no means comparable to the former, regarding the two mentioned exceptions. In fact, the large-scale population of the Iranian diaspora is regarded an authentic source through which the American readers can get acquainted with Iran and the Iranians. Based on their state of in-between-ness, these Iranian-American authors seem reliable for the American readers, as both outsiders and insiders.

Many of American memoirists are immigrants, or children of immigrants; since during the recent decades, the United States has provided opportunities for other nationalities to immigrate to the country. When it comes to literature, one might notice that each of these marginalized immigrant groups has had its own share of literature in the competitive American literary market (Knippling, 1996), especially in writing memoirs. These memoirists intend to share their experiences and understandings with readers (Motlagh, 2008), while writing in English. Consequently, in the literature of the Iranian-American diaspora, the memoir genre has become a prevailing form through which American readers have the chance to become familiar with the contemporary Iran.

Migration of Iranians from Iran, and writing English-written memoirs on Iran can be almost traced back to 1979 Islamic Revolution and hostage crisis. However, there are some books in the form of autobiography which were written before the revolution, such as Najmeh Najafi’s
Persia Is My Heart (1953), and Nahid Rachlin’s Foreigners (1978). The trend of writing memoirs seems to be reinforced through three pivotal events, each of which lead to a mass migration of Iranians to abroad.

The first wave of this migration was followed by the Islamic Revolution in 1979, as well as hostage crisis, which created an American mainstream perception against Iranians (Fotouhi, 2012). Also, the revolution affected the American literature as a turning point in the history of Iran which changed the regime and accordingly, caused migration of Iranians to abroad, and creation of Iranian communities in the United States. Up to 1990s, Iranian-American women writers were mainly ignored. However, a surge of their memoirs occurred since 1990s which have become enormously popular.

The second significant event was 9/11 attacks and its consequences, such as invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, which motivated Western readers to know more about the East, particularly Iran, at that time, with regard to Orientalist discourse of Muslims’ terrorism (Darznik, 2008; Malek, 2006). Therefore, the 9/11 attacks reinforced the Orientalist discourses on the Middle East. A number of these literary works seem to promote the Orientalist tropes on Esterners’ life. In this era, a number of memoirs obtained huge success, among which Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003) can be regarded as the most outstanding book. This surge of literary success followed by some other bestsellers such as Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis (2000), Firoozeh Dumas’ Funny in Farsi (2003), and Azadeh Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad(2005). These literary successes highlight a period of interest in writings of Iranian women diaspora. In fact, the increasing number of these women’s texts conveys their attempt in a response to marginalization of women in Iranian literature. Despite the considerable number of books written by Iranian male authors, their literary works have taken less notice as compared to their female counterparts’, which became enormously popular after events of 9/11 (Fotouhi, 2012).
The third wave was the outcome of 2009 Iranian presidential elections. Back to the time of the first wave, the Iranian-American memoirs were not mentioned and reviewed massively, except for some small amount of reviews. However, after 9/11, so many essays were published about Iranian writing in diaspora between 2001 and 2007 (Fotouhi, 2012). After the elections, the number of memoirs written on the Islamic revolution decreased to a great deal; instead, new issues emerged in the post-2009 memoirs, such as violation of human rights and liberty, political prisoners, torture, injustice, abrogation of women’s rights, etc.

Books Selection Procedure

The current study carries out my exploration of two Iranian-American women's memoirs, Jasmin Darznik’s *The Good Daughter: A Memoir of My Mother's Hidden Life* (2011), and Azadeh Moaveni’s *Honeymoon in Tehran: Two Years of Love and Danger in Iran* (2009), to see to what extent they promote or reject principles of Orientalism.

A great number of books in memoir genre have been written on Iran. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature on these memoirs suggests less writing on the recent memoirs. Accordingly, my thesis is concerned with the recent books. Therefore, my study focuses on post-2009 English-written memoirs on Iran by the Iranian-Americans. I examined the available information to see which one of these books seems more significant. To do this, I investigated the number of libraries in the United States which hold these post-2009 memoirs through the information obtained from Worldcat website (www.worldcat.org) on 30 May, 2014; I concentrated on the books which were hold in more than 600 libraries in the United States. (The available copies of the rest of these books in the U.S. libraries were way less than 600 copies). I also considered these books’ whole number of editions which had come out since then. Based on these criteria, the data gathered suggests that two of these memoirs are the most recent significant memoirs; the data gathered via www.worldcat.org, www.goodreads.com, and www.amazon.com suggested these two books: *The Good
Daughter: A Memoir of My Mother's Hidden Life (Darznik, 2010b) with 615 copies in the Worldcat libraries in the United States and also 15 editions, and Honeymoon in Tehran: Two Years of Love and Danger in Iran (Moaveni, 2009) with 864 copies in the U.S. libraries and 13 editions. Another significant point about these two books is that they have been both published in publications which are among the Big 6 publications (Marlowe, 2010). In this respect, Darznik’s memoir has been published in Grand Central Publishing which is an imprint of Hachette Book Group, and Moaveni’s memoir has been put out in Random House publication. The Good Daughter was put on New York Times bestseller list on Sunday, February 27, 2011, is translated into eight languages, and published in thirteen countries. For the Readers’ Choice Award from the Library of Virginia, the book was a finalist; it was also short-listed for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing (Darznik, 2014). Besides, these two books have also some commonalities which makes my choices even more meaningful; since the two writers are considered the second generation of Iranian Americans, and they are both among diasporic Iranian women authors.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

In the following chapters, I am interested in examining the two authors’ responses to American mainstream representations of Iran and Iranians. Therefore, this study aims to find whether these authors reinforce stereotypes against Iran, or else, there is a chance for Iranian-American authors to intervene in the monolithic U.S. Orientalist discourse and U.S. literary market, in order to provide space for rewriting Iranians strategically. In this respect, I examine the text to see whether Iranian-American authors can introduce new subjectivities and identities through different forms of auto-Orientalism. I intend to explore how such strategy works to rewrite an Orientalist discourse while at the same time citing it. Therefore, my focus is exploring in how they might promote or diverse understanding of the American’s majority towards Iranians. To answer this question, this thesis examines policies of