The cataclysmic events of 9/11 marked a watershed in 21st-century American and world history and, more than ever before, brought Islam to the fore of both public and academic arenas by reinvigorating the curiosity, fear, and suspicion with which Islam has always been characteristically regarded in the west (E. Said, 1978, pp. 60, 255, 261, 288, 345). In the realm of literature, the post-9/11 era has witnessed an upsurge in the number of memoirs penned either by Muslims, mostly from the Middle East (such as Norma Khouri's best-seller *Honor Lost* (2003), published elsewhere as *Forbidden Love* - which proved to be a literary hoax in 2004 (Whitlock, 2010, p. 12)) or by predominantly female hyphenated Americans of Muslim/Middle Eastern origins (such as Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) and *Honeymoon in Tehran*(2009)).

One of the principal reasons for the emergence of this particular trend in the memoir genre is the public curiosity and growing appetite for understanding the Muslim Other and the perceived threat of “Islamic fundamentalism” in the post 9/11 milieu. It was against this backdrop that a new wave of Middle Eastern memoirs emerged that purported to offer insights into the life of Muslims “out there” and present an authentic image of their societies. Prominent within this new trend were Iranian-American memoirs written mostly by female members of the diasporic Iranian community in the U.S. – a phenomenon which owes particularly to the neoconservative narrative regarding the Iranian ‘other’, especially in light of presenting Iran as a ‘nuclear threat’ to the entire world. Undoubtedly, the single most significant literary production in the genre in question until today remains *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi. In the following, it will be illustrated how Nafisi’s memoir draws on established Orientalist discourse surrounding Islam and thus reinforces the post-9/11 Islamophobic atmosphere.

Nafisi’s memoir chronicles the author's life in Iran from 1979 to 1997 mostly through a private literature class she held in her flat with seven of her selected female students for two years. In the circumstances of Nafisi’s narrative, this class serves as the microcosm of Iranian society and it is within the same class that Nafisi’s views on post-revolution Iran and Islam are articulated. Thus, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* purports to be an “illuminating” account catering to the western, and particularly American, public who “seek insight into a country and a people that have been deemed ‘evil’ and an imminent threat to Western society” (Malek, 2006, p. 362).

In brief, one could argue that Nafisi’s narrative is fraught with Islamophobic sentiments. To begin with, Nafisi’s representations of Islam reiterate the classical Orientalist suspicion and contempt for Islam verbatim. In doing so, the memoir recycles some of the most hackneyed myths as well as decontextualized stereotypical statements about the religion – especially as regards feminist issues – which strike a familiar chord with western readers: oppression of women, obsession with virginity (pp. 19, 30, 73, 212, 257, 260), sexual abuse (p. 273), and underage marriage (pp. 27, 260, 261), to name only a few. Thus, Nafisi begins her chapter on Austen with a sarcastic imitation of Austen’s famed quote that “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife” (p. 257). The statement, thus, reiterates the clichéd Orientalist assumptions both about Muslim men’s lasciviousness as well as Muslim women’s oppression by an allegedly irredeemable patriarchal creed, through conjuring up images of child marriage and obsession with virginity.

Principal among the mentioned clichés are representations of the practice of “veiling[!]” as the main culprit in Muslim women’s “oppression”, “invisibility”, and “backwardness” (p. 167). Nafisi does not conceal her loathing for the practice, and goes as far as insinuating that her “girls” – Nafisi’s term for her seven selected students – true subjectivities and identities were fully revealed only when their veils were shed:

*When my students came into that room [Nafisi's living room], they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self. (p. 6)*

In a similar vein, Nafisi expresses her self-confessed “eternal contempt” (p. 288) for Muslim men, and especially university students, all of whom are monolithically represented as “fanatical” (p. 31, 89, 250), abusive (p. 48), and philistine (p. 197). Significantly, Nafisi deprives most of these characters from their voices, thus rendering them invisible, faceless, and even nameless.

One of the more subtle platforms from which *RLT* promotes its unique Islamophobic agenda is the recurrent rendering of Islam as tantamount to Marxism and Communism in their alleged totalitarianism, strategies, and end results. In her discussion of the political milieu that dominated the immediate post-Revolution sociopolitical landscape in Iran, Nafisi’s memoir is predisposed to equate the predominant Islamic movement of the time with those of the Marxist and Communist parties. While it is true that the Islamic, Marxist, and Communist groups formed the major opposition to the monarchy of the time, there were radical differences that distinguished them from one another in both ideology and their modus operandi. However, as is characteristic of all Orientalist discourses, this heterogeneity is effaced in *RLT* in favor of a simplistic rendition of...
them all as “anti-American”.

Tehran, July 1953. Prime Minister Mossadeq’s supporters and members of the communist Tudeh party carry placards denouncing Britain and the US: a local boy is depicted giving John Bull and Uncle Sam the push (Source: www.spectator.co.uk)

In the chapter on *Gatsby*, Nafisi repeatedly interlaces Marxist terminology with her descriptions of what she sees as Islamism, concluding that *Gatsby* offended the sensibilities of both her Muslim and Marxist students for its immorality and materialism respectively (DePaul, 2008, p. 77):

> My students were slightly baffled by *Gatsby*. The story of an idealistic guy, so much in love with this beautiful rich girl who betrays him, could not be satisfying to those for whom sacrifice was defined by words such as masses, revolution and Islam. Passion and betrayal were for them political emotions, and love far removed from the stirrings of Jay Gatsby for Mrs. Tom Buchanan. (p. 108)

In a similar vein, she equates the two ideologies once again when juxtaposing the proletarian author, Mike Gold, with Fitzgerald, claiming that “The revolution Gold desired was a Marxist one and ours was Islamic, but they had a great deal in common, in that they were both ideological and totalitarian” (p. 109). Nafisi’s disturbing conflation of the two belief systems strikes a ready chord with the western reader by invoking the Cold War and the particular circumstances arising from it.

In light of Nafisi’s Islamophobic account, therefore, it is anything but surprising that Nafisi and her memoir have been actively promoted by such U.S. neo-conservative ideologues and political circles as Bernard Lewis, Paul Wolfowitz[2] and Fouad Ajami[3], a fact for which Nafisi has been most vocally criticized by Hamid Dabashi (2006). For instance, Bernard Lewis – whose infamous “clash of civilizations” theory (1990, p. 56) postulates an ineluctable “clash” between the West and Islam[4] – has commended *RLT* as “a masterpiece” offering “profound and fascinating insights” into both Western literature and postrevolutionary Iran.

Nafisi is neo-conservative in her thinly disguised contempt for Islam and her counterposition of Muslim vs. western cultures. Nevertheless, as DePaul has demonstrated, she is “at her most neoconservative” in her conflation of Islam and Marxism which exerts “a powerful effect on many American readers, suggesting an imperative to confront an ideologically opposed enemy that is armed (or soon to be) and extremely dangerous” (2008, p. 80). This bears particular significance given the perpetual representation of Iran as a potential nuclear threat in the west and particularly in the United States.

In his preface to 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, Edward Said laments the fact that general understanding of the Middle East and Islam has scarcely improved and is still guided by a woefully Orientalist frame of reference. As far as Nafisi’s memoir is concerned, one can conclude that the unprecedented promotion and reception of Nafisi’s memoir in the west – and particularly in the U.S. – is a testament to Said’s apt observation that “in the U.S. we face as a nation the deep, profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others–other cultures, states, histories, experiences, traditions, peoples, and destinies” (1993, p. 55).

Footnotes


[2] A staunch disciple of Bernard Lewis, the dean of Johns Hopkins University – where Nafisi was hired – and a key advocate of the invasion of Iraq as deputy secretary of defense from 2001 to 2005 under George W. Bush

[3] Nafisi’s neo-conservative mentor and her boss at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, who was also another outspoken advocate of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

[4] The theory has often been adopted as a point of departure by the United States’ top neo-conservative policymakers.

References


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