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Mosaics of Identity:
Reading Muslim Women's Memoirs
from Across the Diaspora

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature

by

Leila Pazargadi

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mosaics of Identity:
Reading Muslim Women's Memoirs
from Across the Diaspora

by

Leila Pazargadi

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Nasrin Rahimieh, Co-chair

Professor Jenny Sharpe, Co-chair

Mosaics of Identity: Reading Muslim Women's Memoirs From Across the Diaspora addresses Muslim women's life writing in transit since 9/11. This project follows the memoir boom fueled by many Middle Eastern women writers publishing in the U.S., Australia and Europe. By studying contemporary Arab and Iranian women's memoirs and autofictional works, this project investigates the expression of life writers who are trying to influence their local and global communities through the form of the confessional. This research project focuses on modes of self-representation in Middle Eastern women's personal narratives, paying careful attention to the narrative strategies they use to negotiate art and meaning within memoir.

The first chapter, entitled, “True Lies: Reviving Orientalism in Honor-Killing Hoaxes” argues that the two so-called “honor killing” memoirs, *Forbidden Love* and *Burned Alive*, were successfully believed as genuine memoirs for over two years, despite the fact that they were hoaxes, because of the political post-9/11 climate resurrecting Orientalist attitudes about the Middle East. These sensationalized works used Orientalist tropes to become best-selling memoirs and in doing so, they strike many questions about how their deception was successful. Although Muslim women’s memoirs can serve as a forum for creating revisionist histories through female life stories, they also function as narratives written, published and marketed with the intentionality of producing works that perform the native informant’s narrative. This chapter frames my exploration of Muslim women’s memoirs in my other three chapters, which explore counter-narratives that defy these stereotypes constructed by dominant Euro-American literatures.

The second chapter, “Comedic Masks, Tragic Faces: Humor, Racial Passing, and Identity Fragmentation in the Memoirs of Firoozeh Dumas and Marjane Satrapi,” argues that the use of humor and satire are formal devices in which Iranian immigrant women use to negotiate the precarious position of the immigrant liminal self. More specifically, these writers use humor as a metaphorical mask that allows them to partially conceal what they choose to communicate to their readers. Because this dissertation explores counter-narratives of neo-Orientalist testimonials, it explores the varying narrative devices that disrupt the conventions of memoirs penned by Middle Eastern women writers. In the memoirs of Dumas and Satrapi, the authors incorporate humor to critique Iranian, American and European societies.

Chapter Three, entitled, “Mosaics of American Muslims: Reading Islam Across Mohja Kahf’s Poetry and Fiction,” investigates the way Mohja Kahf carves out a space for Muslim Americans, especially for Muslim women, in her semi-fictional works. Though her novel *Girl in*

the Tangerine Scarf is a fictional bildungsroman about the life of Syrian American, Khadra Shamy, it bears the semi-autobiographical perspective of the author, incorporating Kahf's personal experiences as a Syrian Muslim in America. By using fiction, the author is able to delve into sensitive and somewhat taboo issues surrounding her community and discuss American politics, without having to claim testimonial authenticity. In her autofiction, she is free to paint a diverse picture of Arab American and Muslim women, without being limited to the genre of memoir. This chapter discusses both her poetry and fiction to highlight shared themes resisting the essentialization of Muslim women as backward and silent. Her recuperation of veiling is a common motif that runs throughout both works, and it is significant since Kahf attempts to demonstrate the positive and personal expressions of veiling to American audiences.

My fourth and final chapter, "Dislocations of Self: Unfixing Identity in Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine*" explores the connection between the autobiographical voice and the narrative structure of a fictional autobiography presented as a series of first chapters. The author creates a fictional memoir from the perspective of a Lebanese American woman, Sarah Nour El-Din, who struggles to write her life story in a series of first chapters. Alameddine creates the anti-memoir, which refuses to limit itself to chronology, truth and conventional life-storytelling. Because every chapter begins as Chapter One, Alameddine draws attention to the difficulty of succinctly and chronologically writing one's life story in a memoir, while also engaging the varying voices of the autobiographical "I" to dismantle the notion of a unified self. By creating a fictional memoir, Alameddine mocks the form of writing so popular amongst contemporary Arab American women writers, and he resists rendering his protagonist as a transparent native informant and cultural guide for American readers.

The dissertation of Leila Pazargadi is approved.

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2012

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated – in loving memory – to my father, Dr. Shayan Pazargadi, and – in living celebration – to my grandmother, Pourandokht Moayeri, and my aunt, Golrokh Moayeri, whose encouragement and support have helped shape this text. *Mosaics of Identity* especially stands as a testament to the strength and courage of my mother, Fatemeh Moayeri, whose determination and perseverance continue to inspire me everyday. She is a strong Iranian *shirzan*, a lioness whose example speaks to the capabilities of women.

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Both the Center for the Study of Women at U.C.L.A. and the Constance Coiner Graduate Fellowship have generously supported my research and travels. To Virginia Coiner Classick, I am grateful to have been chosen to honor her sister Dr. Constance Coiner and her commitment to engaging feminist issues.

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U.C.L.A. has been incredible in providing me with countless resources and programs for exploring my scholarship. The Academic Advancement Program at U.C.L.A. has been an inspirational source for financially supporting me and putting me in touch with a unique group of people dedicated to fostering diversity initiatives at Vrije University in Amsterdam and at California State Long Beach. By my students at A.A.P., U.C.L.A., V.U., Occidental College and Cal State Long Beach, I am awed by their perseverance and creativity. They have patiently allowed me to teach and work through the material of this dissertation and for that, I am grateful.

Since this project began with a Richter Summer Research Grant at Occidental College in 2003, I must heartily thank Dr. Deborah Martinson and Dr. Warren Montag for mentoring me at the earliest stage of my research and for continuing their mentorship throughout the years. They inspired me to continue my academic endeavors in a doctoral program and without their enthusiasm and support, I could not have finished my Ph.D.

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VITA

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Introduction:

Perceptions of Reality in Muslim Women's Memoirs Across the Diaspora

The Persian tradition of storytelling begins with the phrase, “*yekī būd, yekī nabūd, gheyr az khoda hich kas nabūd*” or “there was one, there was no one, there was no one but God.”¹ The paradoxical connotations of this idiom disrupt perceptions of reality, suggesting that truth is found elsewhere, perhaps only known to a supreme being. With respect to autobiographical writing, this phrase illuminates the inherent limits of life writing, which show the elusiveness and fictiveness of the desire to represent the self. I invoke this phrase to begin my discussion of Iranian and Arab Muslim immigrant women writers whose autobiographical works are often interpreted as concrete truths (when in reality the fluidity of memory inevitably distorts truth-telling). The idiom highlights a journey of discovery, one that creates linkages between truth, self, and faith. In the field of Middle Eastern Muslim women's autobiographical writing, there is a conflict between the writer's concealment of the self and her disclosure of personal experience. The degree of revelation between the author and her audience is a central struggle in women's life writings. As immigrant Muslim writers in the United States and Europe, women often write their testimonies to uncover a new truth about the movement between homeland and elsewhere, as well as to engage in discussions about Islam in a post-9/11 geopolitical global climate. Often, they inevitably paint a complex portrait of the seemingly average Muslim woman, depicting diverse identities that counter prevalent American perceptions homogenizing Muslim women.

In studying the autobiographical and autofictional² writings of Arab and Iranian women who immigrated to the United States and Europe, from Iran and the Arab *mashreq*,³ which includes in this study, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories, this project bridges a gap between the fields of women's autobiographical study, American ethnic studies,

and postcolonial studies. In particular, I discuss the way in which Middle Eastern Muslim immigrant writers address their position as potential native informants⁴ to “Western”⁵ audiences. Although Muslim women’s writings published abroad sometimes fall into stereotyped marketing strategies (as exotic storytellers bearing witness), I explore alternative texts and counter-narratives that resist the sensationalism of the market, while also evaluating narrative strategies that disrupt and enhance the tradition of memoir. How Muslim women writers embrace, resist, negotiate, or somehow manipulate their positions as intercultural go-betweens can expose the colonialist and imperialist intercessions within their native countries. For instance, memoirists such as Norma Khouri and Souad, who discuss Muslim honor crimes, deliberately assume the role of the native informant and support the hegemonic views of the Global North⁶ by rendering Muslim women as in need of saving. In contrast, writers such as Marjane Satrapi, Firoozeh Dumas, and Mohja Kahf manipulate the position of cultural representative in order to educate non-Iranians and non-Arabs about the fragility of their position in-between Middle Eastern and Euro–American cultures. They are willing interlocutors about Middle Eastern culture and politics, since they create images countering the overly simplistic stereotypes about Muslims disseminated by the mainstream media. In this way, they capture complex identities of Muslims within their works, which often breaks through the expectations that “Western” readers anticipate from “Eastern” storytellers.

In this dissertation, I discuss the modes of self-representation in Middle Eastern women’s personal narratives, paying careful attention to the narrative strategies they use to negotiate art and meaning within memoir. Through the manipulation of autobiographical convention and narrative technique, the disruption of traditional form, and humor and wit used for satirical

writing, I discern how these writers move within the boundaries of the genre, transforming the genre of memoir altogether.

Writing in Exile, Writing in the Diaspora

i am an arab,
alienated from american,
sitting on the other side of that hyphen
—Laila Shereen

To begin my discussion of Middle Eastern diasporic women writers, I invoke an excerpt from a poem by Arab American poet Laila Shereen, “On Becoming Arab,” which serves as an epigraph to point out the tension of cultural and ethnic hyphenations (Shereen). For many immigrants, the hyphen in Arab–American or Iranian–American serves to bridge the gap between two different cultures, to neutralize otherness. Salah Hassan and Marcy Knopf-Newman assert that the hyphen brings with it a dilemma: should scholars who work in cultural studies and ethnic literatures use it to question the politics of multiculturalism in the United States (Hassan et al. 4)? Determining Arab American or Iranian American identity is complicated, especially for the Arab and Iranian sides of the hyphen. In the late 1970s, Arab identity had been previously associated with the Pan-Arab movements of the twentieth century, while Iranian identity had anchored itself in the Persian culture and revolutionary movements of 1979. Hyphenation, therefore, becomes an interesting factor, which shows the limitations and tensions surrounding the construction of Arab American or Iranian American subjectivities (4). Because of political movements, which caused them to flee and carry this hyphenation, many Arab and Iranian American writers produce their work in exile. In my study, I choose not to hyphenate ethnic American identities because I do not want to situate or categorize identity. Rather, I would like to draw attention to ethnic American

relationships such as Iranian American or Arab American, bringing awareness to the tension and difficulty of reducing identities to distinct ethnic categories.

Writers and critics alike celebrate the notion that, in exile, Middle Eastern women writers have the chance to capture the fragility of their positions and limited mobility that had been previously experienced in their native countries. Middle Eastern American women writers who confront the political systems dominated by male hierarchies defy political norms and are sometimes banished or driven into self-imposed exile. Because many immigrant writers seek political asylum, any narrative capturing a view “against the grain of social conformity” jeopardizes the safety of the author (Martinson 6). Since there was a time when women were not able to openly discuss their private lives, many Muslim women writers became motivated to share their life experiences with the world through the process of self-writing. Taking into consideration women writers from politically turbulent countries such as Afghanistan, feminist activists recall “there was a time that no pen moved to write a poem or article that reflected the realities of Afghanistan ... and the image of the Afghan women, silent under the *burqa*, does not tell the truth of our lives nor our resistance” (Brodsky 12). The success of these memoirs demonstrates a kind of agency that was previously off limits to these women inside the nation.

Writers within the Iranian and Arab American diasporic communities construct a new relation to home through life writing. In the case of the Iranian diaspora, anthropologist Nilou Mostofi notes that Iranian immigrants in the United States maintain cultural, not national, characteristics of the Persian identity. As Persians (rather than Iranians), many construct culture to revert to positive connotations of pre-Islamic practices, while rejecting the negative political associations of being an Iranian citizen of the Islamic Republic while abroad. This speaks to Salman Rushdie’s assertions that, “Migrants must, out of necessity, make a new imaginative

relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habits ... They refuse to become totally assimilated into the host society, but they do not return to their homelands ... In the meantime, they construct an imaginary nation both of the homeland and of their own presence in exile” (Rushdie 125). Through the perspective of the narrating autobiographer, the reimagining of homeland is a central focus of autobiographies, and is often a product of living in transit.

As part of Middle Eastern women’s life writing, the trope of exile has become increasingly popular among immigrant writers, especially for Palestinians, Syrians, Iranians, Iraqis, and Afghans, who attempt to reconcile the “here” of their American locale and the “there” of their left-behind homeland. In her article “The New Nomads,” Eva Hoffman notes that exile has become “sexy, glamorous and interesting” in contemporary literature (Hoffman 44).

Hoffman states, “[T]his privileging of exile compresses two things: first a real description of our world, which indeed has become more de-centered, fragmented, and unstable, and second, an admiration of these qualities, which is more problematic since it underestimates the actual condition of exile and its psychic implications” (44). Nevertheless, many Muslim immigrants and refugees have internalized and externalized exile, sacrificing their homeland and cultural heritage for freedom and economic opportunity elsewhere. For contemporary Muslim women writers, exile becomes an essential and characteristic part of identity that anticipates the loss of community, history, and home (14).

While exile severs the writer’s tie to nation, it paradoxically offers the freedom to create a new identity through a record of home that is improvised in narrative form. Upon suffering “deracination, exile and alienation” as part of leaving the homeland, immigrant writers search for self-discovery and a reconstituted identity in the quest for a new home (15). Through distance, “the exile gains not only the perspective which allows them to see their home clearly, but they

also have immediate and pressing comparisons to make” with their new surroundings (25). The writer gains perspective with increasing distance from their home, thereby allowing them to more freely document their experiences. These individuals, families, and communities who have dealt with the loss of national identity have also managed to preserve the dignity of their existence, thereby giving rise to a new consciousness in women’s exile literature. The literature resulting from this experience is the most exciting literary result of Muslim and Middle Eastern women’s immigration, which allows for new discoveries and connections to become immortalized in literary form.

Middle Eastern Women’s Life Writing: A Historical Discussion

To begin my exploration of autobiographical writing of Middle Eastern women writers, it is first important to recognize the very recent development of this trend and to investigate why Muslim women were not publishing as much previously as they are now. Though there is an abundance of ethnic Euro–American memoirs today, initially, immigrant women writers of Arab and Iranian descent were skeptical and scared of writing the tell-all testimony, since it was a censored and unfavorable genre in their national literatures. Self-exposure through writing often threatens notions of *izzat* and *āberū*,⁷ which requires the disclosure of secrets to propel the autobiographical narrative forward. Not only were Arab and Iranian women apprehensive about writing the confessional, but also, their male counterparts, whose works were more widely distributed and studied in European and American universities, eclipsed the few works that they did publish during the 1970s. Except for a few exceptional cases, such as Egyptian Nawal el-Saadawi, Lebanese Layla Baalbaki and Syrian Colette Khuri, who were publishing memoirs about their political activism in the 1970s, Middle Eastern women’s autobiographies were not

published, and the few that were not widely circulated or taught in the universities (al-Hassan Golley xv).

For autobiographical writers, self-writing relates directly to the ways in which the subject locates the self in society and history. Arab and Iranian women writers, in particular, must locate themselves within the complex subject/object relationship discussed within postcolonial studies and feminist discourse. In their writing, Middle Eastern women writers struggle to speak and write, just as much as they struggle to be heard and read.

Despite the richness and diversity of the Arabic literary cannon, Arab women writers have not been studied until recently, since the 1980s when translators turned their sights to notable feminist authors, such as Hanan al-Shaykh and Alifa Rifat. Historically, as miriam cooke⁸ points out, “Arab women were thought not to write,” and most Euro–American universities ignored Arab women’s writing, instead teaching the works of their male counterparts (al-Hassan Golley xv). If before the 1980s, Arab women writers were largely ignored, after the 1980s, their books were widely read. This prompts the question: what explains their exclusion in the Arabic literary canon before and inclusion among Western academics later? Ultimately, one queries, why is there a growing global interest in “Third World”⁹ Middle Eastern women writers now?

Perhaps to explain the popularity of Arab women’s writing after the 1980s, one must consider the history of conflict in the Middle East. The Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, the first Palestinian Intifada between 1987 and 1993, the Iran–Iraq War between 1980 and 1988, and the Gulf War between 1990 and 1991 were all the result of Euro–American interests in the Middle East. During this turbulent time, literary critics were surprised and impressed to find that women were not just writing about the domestic sphere. Instead, Arab women writers were

politically deploying their pens to describe the way in which they were fighting in the Lebanese civil war, or supporting the Intifada and calling for reforms while critiquing the methods that Arab men used to fight against Israeli occupiers (al-Hassan Golley xv). Furthermore, during the worldwide thirst for oil, women from the Arabian Peninsula recorded the modernization and technological advancements that were occurring in their communities. They considered the way in which oil-driven reforms were changing the physical and figurative landscapes around them.

Concurrently, during this period, Arab writers in exile and in the Diaspora also began to publish their works in two locales: in France and the United States. The number of Arabs immigrating to both of these countries after the 1980s spiked due to the violence of the conflicts in the Middle East. Movement from their homelands prompted many Arabs to discuss the process of their immigration, rooting their experiences in a discussion about the self. In the United States, following the Gulf War, Americans (and white Anglo-Saxon Americans, in particular) made Arabs aware of their ethnic differences, prompting many immigrants to write about their lives in the hopes of recuperating Arab identity. For Arab women, it became imperative to write, to not just assert themselves within an Arab and feminist contexts, such as Islamic feminism, but to also break through stereotyping that was forming against Arabs during the 1980s and 1990s in America. In order to reclaim Arab identity, Arab American¹⁰ women writers published autobiographical material, in particular, to humanize and individualize pejorative confrontations with racism in the United States.

Additionally, because there was a global emergence of Islamic feminist discourse during the 1990s, largely driven by North African and Arab writers such as Fatima Mernissi, Assia Djebar, and Leila Ahmed, Muslim women began including their personal experiences pertaining to religion and feminism as part of autobiographical writing.¹¹ In writing life narratives, these

women authors were not just sharing their experiences and perspectives with other Muslims, but also informing non-Muslims who might have exposure to immigrants living in Western countries such as France, Britain, and the United States about Middle Eastern and Muslim issues. I am considering the fact that these women were not writing in their native Arabic, but in European languages that not only appealed to larger global audiences but also allowed them to work outside the conventions and parameters of culture. In the case of Algerian writer Assia Djebar, who published autobiographical writing in a series of four works in French, the author raised issues about home/exile. She wrote about her life from spaces outside the nation and appealed to Arabs in Francophone countries who were experiencing the trauma of decolonization and/or immigration. In doing so, she played the role of historical intermediary, exposing the identity politics that Algerians were facing in the wake of decolonization. Yet, the fact that she writes in French and not in Arabic is a product of her own postcolonial identity, because she writes within the perimeters of empire. Nonetheless, in her initial writings, she served as a sort of native informant who communicated to French audiences the struggles of the formerly colonized Algerian peoples.¹²

While Arab women began writing personal narratives about these conflicts in Arabic, French, and English, Iranian women writers avoided personal testimony for fear of social censure. According to Farzaneh Milani in her earlier work, entitled “Veiled Voices: Women’s Autobiographies in Iran,” though Iranians closely followed Western literary traditions, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they suppressed public exposure of the self (Milani 9). Proverbs that recommend one should “save face,” “protect appearances,” and “keep the face red with a slap” were commonly (and are still) used in Iran, which Milani asserts discourages Iranians, especially women, from narrating their life experiences (9). Of course, during the 1980s

through the 1990s, the newly formed Islamic Republic and its censorship also thwarted full disclosure, causing women to disguise their social and gender criticisms in fictional short stories and novels. Except for a few exceptions during the 1990s, ranging from the Marxist revolutionary Marziyeh Ahmadi Osku'i to Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, to political activist Ashraf Dehqani to writer Golī Taraqī,¹³ Iranian women did not begin publishing their autobiographies until after the millennium, until after they had been living abroad for at least a decade (and mostly in languages other than Persian). In her dated essay, Milani asserts the figurative veiling of women's narratives with the compulsory veiling laws of the newly established Islamic Republic. While that might have been initially true, it no longer applies to Muslim feminists who are writing, such as Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi and Mohja Kahf, who are advocates for women's rights.

Ebadi's memoir, *Iran Awakening* (2006), disrupts Milani's assessment that parallels the veiling of the body with the veiling of words. Though the act of penning an autobiography often incorporates embellishments that accompany storytelling, Shirin Ebadi's memoir shows what women are able to accomplish within the legal system of Iran, in addition to which laws need to be changed and which issues must be addressed. She veils because she works as a lawyer and human rights activist in the Iranian system, a system that, contrary to American and European assertions, is able to stretch and facilitate change for women.¹⁴ Contrary to American perceptions about veiling, because of the gender neutralization that *shari'a* law implements via compulsory veiling, women have been able to enter the public and political arenas. Currently, women are serving as parliamentary members in Iran, when they had been previously excluded during the Muhammad Reza Shah's reign. One can conclude that this example of veiling complicates the notion that women lose agency when donning the veil (as I later discuss in Chapter Three about

Mohja Kahf). Because her memoir was written in English, co-written by Azadeh Moaveni, famed Iranian American journalist and memoirist, and commissioned and published by Random House, her target audience is primarily an American and broader Anglophone readership outside of Iran. This is further evidenced through the text's opening pages, which includes a hand-drawn map of Iran and its neighboring countries; reminiscent of old English maps detailing faraway places and future conquests. The Romanized imitation of a Perso–Arabic font only adds to the effect that the map details the exotic Middle East. Its placement before the prologue serves as a testament to the writer's purpose, reiterated throughout her memoir: to educate her non-Iranian readers about Iran.

By studying contemporary Arab and Iranian women's memoirs and autofictional works, this project investigates the expression of life writers who would like to influence their local and global communities through the form of the confessional. According to Nawar al-Hassan Golley's *Arab Women's Lives Retold*, in the study of Middle Eastern women's autobiographies issues of postcolonialism, nationalism, feminism, transnationalism, political activism, and subjectivity converge in the discussion of Arab women's writing (al-Hassan Golley xxvii). In a global environment fraught with American imperialism during the Gulf War, the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the personal anecdotes and narrative retellings of women's experiences from these geographical areas speak against the hegemonic records of history. On one hand, when these memoirs sustain and justify imperial intercession within countries of the Global South, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, they are congruent with the values of American imperialism. Yet, on the other hand, when Middle Eastern women writers are conscious of these issues and offer insightful critiques that resist Euro–American stereotypes about Muslims, they write against the notion that Middle

Eastern cultures are backward, in the dark, and in need of light from the civilizing “West.”

Instead, they humanize their Muslim and Middle Eastern subjects, challenging recycled, negative stereotypes.

In terms of the fields of American ethnic literature and ethnic studies,¹⁵ 9/11 dramatically altered the perceptions of Arabs and Iranians as potential threats to American and European jurisdiction. In terms of ethnic studies, Steven Salaita notes that Arab Americans¹⁶ came into sharper focus after 9/11, where they had been previously unnoticed (*Anti-Arab Racism* 149). While in terms of ethnic studies, Arab Americans were not solidified as a group and were somewhat the “invisible racial/ethnic group” prior to 9/11, afterward, scholars and literary critics began acknowledging them as a solidified group who started producing scholarship about their own cultures. Salaita observes that prior to 9/11, scholarship concerning Arab Americans derived from the analysis and study by many non-Arabs, who were discussing the marginality of Arab Americans. Yet, after 9/11, Arab Americans were faced with the demand to explain and translate their culture for Americans (149).

While Arab Americans and Muslim Americans were somewhat visible before 9/11, they took center stage afterwards, which resulted in an explosion of cultural production, including literary works that discuss the personal experiences of Arabs in America. As Salaita notes, after 9/11, there was an insatiable appetite for works about Arab Americans, written by Arab Americans, so that they could explain their culture to the American people. Because 9/11 was one of the most pivotal events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which shaped the destiny of Middle Eastern Americans, the sudden attention they received after the pivotal event triggered an introspective look into the community. Moreover, for other ethnic Americans who

oppose American policies, the emergence of a discourse about Arab American literature, culture, and identity has become an important model for developing their own critical scholarship.

Following in the literary footsteps of their Arab American counterparts, Iranian American writers have also been publishing works that critically engage American policies and attitudes towards the Middle Eastern “other,” just as their predecessors had. Triggered by the events of 9/11 and Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech, Iranian memoirs published after 2003 in the United States and Europe have become more recently popular and widely produced. Though the Iranian and Arab writers of this study are ethnically distinct from one another, as Muslims they share cultural and religious practices, as well as shared adopted nationalities as new Americans. Especially after 9/11, Arab and Iranian American writers, in particular, produced poems, short stories, and essays that dealt with the changing environment of American politics. I, therefore, use discourses and debates surrounding Arab American literature as a means of carving out a space for Iranian American writers, who, as West Asian Americans, are now contributing to the canon of ethnic–American literature and Asian American literature.

Why Memoir? Exploring Muslim Women Immigrants’ Autobiographies

In light of the recent publishing trend of Muslim women’s memoirs and fiction depicting immigration from Middle Eastern/West Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, and the Palestinian territories, women writers capture the fragility of their position in American and European societies, while adopting the form of testimonial literature. The trend is certainly evident in the recent publishing sensation of Muslim women’s memoirs by authors such as Tara Bahrapour, Firoozeh Dumas, Norma Khouri, Leila, Azadeh Moaveni, Mukhtar Mai, Azar Nafisi, Nahid Rachlin, Marjane Satrapi, Saira Shah, and Souad. These writers have met with remarkable success, since in testimonial they attempt to repackage the East according to the

values of the West. They render their home countries in a way that is more palatable to the average American and European audiences.

I am compelled to ask then: what explains the sudden interest in Muslim women's narratives? The narrative "I" of autobiography and memoir seems to be changing to encapsulate cultural performance, since Muslim women writers are thrust into the role of native informants to First World liberal audiences. But, what are the dangers of a liberal discourse that attempts to shape and supposedly liberate another culture and community according to European and American values? With the popular trend in publishing Muslim women's memoirs, I am invested in pursuing: why memoir?

Critics such as Nawar Al-Hassan Golley and Gillian Whitlock agree that in writing a memoir, Middle Eastern women writers are able to merge the private and domestic space with the public sector, in which they use writing and publishing as a means of coping with the events of their lives, such as childbirth, immigration, abandonment, displacement, and cultural trauma. They fashion their own images of the self through the retelling of their lives, thus using their voice as a creative agent of expression. Yet, the life-writing practices of women have developed beyond the earlier analysis of Chandra Mohanty, Julia Watson, and Sidonie Smith. With respect to the autobiographical articulations of decolonized subjects, all three scholars assert that the colonized are not merely objects of the colonizers, but are "agents of a conflicted history, inhabiting and transforming a complex social and cultural world" (Smith and Watson *Women, Autobiography*). Moreover, Judith Butler also asserts that agency is located within the variation of hegemonic discourse. With this in mind, by writing revisionist histories and alternative testimonies, autobiographical subjects can assert agency through the writing of the self (xx). Through writing, Middle Eastern women are able to question established customs and

resist patriarchal limitations while also creating anti-imperialist solidarities (al-Hassan Golley xxvii). Steven Salaita notes that ethnic writers have the ability to challenge American hegemony (*Anti-Arab Racism* 147). By marketing Muslim women as “victims” or “escapees,” as Mohja Kahf identifies, publishers take advantage of Muslim women’s works, using it to strengthen their position of dominance over marginalized Muslims (Gana 1578).

I have found, as author Mary Anne Broe has, that in autobiographical texts, women respond differently than men with respects to the political systems designed to oppress and incapacitate those who refuse to subscribe to the “central home ideology” (Broe 7). Similarly, Amy Malek asserts that “Women’s stories—unlike men’s—remain unfamiliar and need to be told; to her mind, whether they are as good as or better than men’s memoirs is beside the point” (Malek 362). In this way, women are able to assert their political agency, not just against male oppression, as is commonly done in sensationalized Muslim women’s writings, but they are also able to address other issues pertaining to women’s rights. The trajectory of memoir has come a long way since, as Milani asserts, post-revolutionary Iranian women writers who were publishing their memoirs censored their stories because the male literary tradition of autobiographical writing insisted that certain kinds of experiences “are worthy of serious consideration” (Milani 11).

The production of memoir brings with it many advantages previously omitted by the genre of autobiography. As survivors of turbulent events, many immigrant women writers testify to their trauma repeatedly, in order to create a language that will effectively articulate it (Gilmore 7). Perhaps more fluid and flexible than autobiography, as a genre, memoir allows the writer to concede that memory, rather than fact, is the chief driving force behind writing. In autobiography, the risk of being accused of lying or inflating the truth threatens the writer into

continued silence unless it becomes something else, a negotiation of identity and artistic form (3). Critics assert that through memoir, a woman writer can write “around” a male audience by conceding that the events of the text are based on personal memory, acknowledging, in essence, that such memory might be flawed. This consequently relieves the narrator of political responsibility (3). According to Leigh Gilmore, memoir has become “*the genre ... for those whose private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment*” (3). While in autobiography the use of “I” integrates confessional discourse, assumed “interiority” with an ethical mandate to examine that interiority, in memoir the “I” promotes the explicitly constituted, subjective, and individualized (Smith and Watson *Women, Autobiography* 299). Thus, in memoir, the political context of negotiating identity blurs the private and public context of women’s lives, forcing them into a kind of renewal. Although memoir has become a popular genre for Third World Muslim women writers, as it allows for flexibility in meaning, global audiences, nonetheless, too often interpret it as fact.

As part of the genre of autobiography, life narrative is political, since it engages and critiques cultural conflict. Autobiography can personalize and humanize accounts that are frequently unseen or misunderstood. Gillian Whitlock points out that to be able to recognize a female refugee via her book cover or story can serve as a powerful form of social justice (*Soft Weapons* 3). Yet, as she qualifies, these memoirs can also serve as “soft” weapons, because they can easily be appropriated for state propaganda. I would extend this view to also consider exaggerated memoirs by Middle Eastern women writers to be considered as “cultural artifacts,” reflective of an era that rewards narratives of escape from the “East” and assimilation into the “West” with book awards and bestselling credits. While “Third World” women writers attempt to share their stories with the world, they are knowingly or unknowingly taking part in a “careful

manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere, and in a management of information in the engineering of consent” (3). We must, then, consider this shift in memoir, where narratives were initially testimonials of personal accounts, but have now become products of the West’s growing demand for *exotic* life histories that justify imperial expansion.

Now, it seems that there is a need for Muslim women writers to articulate personal experience as well as to cater to the international market’s growing demand for knowledge about the condition of Muslim women, particularly after the rise of imperial campaigns in the Middle East and North Africa. Chandra Mohanty similarly attributes the growing circulation of so-called ethnic Third World autobiographies and memoirs to Euro–American desires for diversification of its Eurocentric canons. Certainly, this has become the case in a post-9/11 global climate, after which, the United States continues to conduct long military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is not surprising, then, that contemporary Muslim memoirs, especially those narrating the transgressions of Middle Eastern culture, are written, published, and marketed with the intention of producing works that perform the native’s narrative.

While many Arab American women writers discuss in their autobiographical narratives experiences about cultural clashes and border crossings, a series of autobiographical narratives focus on rendering the personal as political. Many Arab American writers confront memories of the past and rearticulate their trauma in autobiographical writing. As Sidonie Smith points out, this kind of writing is a “culturally disruptive” writing process that can recreate trauma for the writer who attempts to contain it within the confessional (qtd. in Whitlock *Soft Weapons* 16). However, Daphne Grace asserts that memory is in itself problematic, since, “Memory is a mixed blessing ... Memory *selects*, and *interprets*—and what is to be selected and how it needs to be interpreted is a moot matter and an object of continuous contention” (al-Hassan Golley 181).¹⁷ It

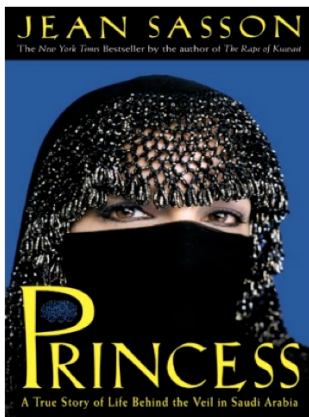
seems that memory recreates and perhaps reorders truth out of the fragments of the past. This remembering, dismembering, and reconstructing of the past often forges a new and provisional history that hangs in the balance of truth and untruth (181). In fact, Bill Ashcroft asserts, “lying is never simply opposed to truth, but is a sort of hybrid overlapping of different registers of narrative, a ‘rhetoric’” (Ashcroft 136). In this light, one can view autobiography as a performance of an individual’s interpretation of experience, ruling out solipsism. Thus, the autobiographer interpolates during the process of self-writing, particularly during the creation of memoir and testimonial.

Methodology: Evaluating Paratexts

In order to gauge effectively the packaging of memoirs, I review interviews with the authors and evaluate book covers, introductions, prefaces, appendixes, and general endorsements surrounding the text. In doing so, I partly draw on Gérard Genette’s methodology of evaluating paratexts for my discussion of Muslim women’s self-writing, additionally expounding upon the narrative constructions of memoir. In his seminal work, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette asserts that the packaging of a text plays an important role in shaping the reception of an author’s work. Paratexts are made up of peritexts, which are those elements “inside” the text, such as dedications, endorsements, and book covers, while epitexts are materials “outside” the bound volume, which include interviews, criticisms, public appearances, and personal circumstances surrounding a writer and her work (Genette 8). For instance, by surveying many book covers of bestselling Middle Eastern Muslim women’s memoirs, it becomes clear that authors and publishing houses who sensationalize Muslim women’s life stories feature a veiled woman on their cover. The recycling of this image is two-fold: first, to signal the exotic, Middle Eastern locale of the author’s background; and secondly, to suggest that she was victimized

there. The success of this obvious strategy is supported by high sales from an average readership that expects narratives retelling the victimization of Muslim women.

The use of veiling for the packaging of Muslim women's memoirs can be traced back to earlier publications, such as Nahid Rachlin's novel *The Foreigner* (1978), or in the prolific body of biographies published by Jean Sasson. Most notably, her *Princess Trilogy*, which discusses the life of Princess Sultana al-Saud, features veiled women on all three of its covers. As an example, *Princess* (1992) features a woman wearing an ornate *pushiya*-like face veil, which conceals all but her dramatically lined eyes, darkened with kohl. True to form, the cover features



(Marco Baldi for Lightbourne)

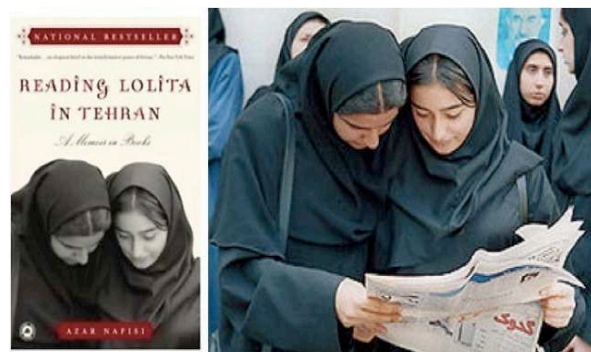
the image of an attractive and heavily made-up, but veiled, woman, who is featured above the catchy title, *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*. Presented with an endorsement by Betty Mahmoody, famed writer and autobiographical subject of *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), Sasson immortalizes Orientalized depictions of Middle Eastern

Muslim women in her works. By using the veil as the iconic figure on the cover of her biographies, Sasson and her publishers package their texts as exotic and authentic. Additionally, *Desert Royal* (1999), *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* (2003), *Love in a Torn Land* (2007), and *For the Love of a Son* (2011) all depict veiled women, as if to suggest that the texts are tackling serious issues about Muslim women's lives.

Through the depiction of the veil on the cover of Muslim women's memoirs, publishers visually signal a tale presumably told by a formerly silent Muslim women. Moreover, authors similarly suggest they will tackle feminist issues via discussions about veiling and female genital cutting (FGC), however, they fail to sufficiently address other women's rights issues, such as

divorce rights, child custody, and the practice of polygamy in their home countries. In this light, the veil becomes the limiting signifier for the signified struggles of the oppressed Muslim woman. Mohja Kahf speculates that the industry of publishing often grants “little control” to the author to choose her book cover. She asserts, “The industry likes to put authors into niches such as “women’s literature (read: chick lit) and “brand” their work according to the “platform” they see a writer as having” (*Islamic Magazine* 3). Because the veil is almost always cast within these texts as oppressive and the confining marker for the “other,” it is interesting to explore the instances where they are representational of identity construction. By evaluating the language and images used both in the text as well as to describe and promote the texts, I will be able to trace the textual cultures of autobiography, which are vital to cross-cultural inquiry into life narrative.

When considering the cover of Azar Nafisi’s bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), the reader is greeted with recycled images of veiled women, cropping the image of these women and stripping them of their agency. The cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* depicts two veiled women, whose eyes and heads are lowered to suggest that they are downcast or simply reading a forbidden book in Iran. As Hamid Dabashi points out in his controversial *Al-Ahram Weekly* article, wherein he tore apart Nafisi, he is correct in pointing out that on the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was appropriated from an entirely different context: it was taken from news reports during the parliamentary election of February 2000 in Iran. In the original picture, the two young women are, in fact, reading the leading reformist newspaper,



(Dabashi, “Native Informants”)

Mosharekat (Dabashi “Native Informers”). The image was cropped, creating the illusion that they are abject and “reading Lolita,” while the scarves of the two teenagers visualize the location, “in Tehran.” Nafisi and her editor cut out the setting of the college campus, the reading of the newspaper, and the picture of President Sayyid Mohammad Khatami, who was at the time the symbol of the Reformist moment, thereby erasing their political agency.

Using these covers as an example, these memoirs employ a repetitive visual and literary reframing of the Muslim female subject. Some avoid making eye contact, while others possess a frank gaze with dramatically made-up eyes. They are often abstracted onto the cover, or cropped and repositioned in some way. The framing device creates a narrow focus that not only renders women as abject, but as object—in terms of desire. Moreover, this reframing becomes a metaphor for neo-Orientalist projects, which crop and edit Middle Eastern women’s life stories to fit the paradigm of the victimized Muslim woman. What is significant about the rise of Neo-Orientalism in this context is that Muslim women autobiographers are participating in the packaging and communication of their texts.¹⁸ In this way, they are complicit in promoting Western stereotypes in the very act of asserting their agency through a writing of their memoirs. In so doing, they break through previous colonial paradigms that relied on the transmission of information by European and American colonialists and imperialists. Rather, they Orientalize themselves and disseminate views in line with American and European propaganda against the Middle East.

Because of increasing anti-Muslim sentiments since 9/11, some Middle Eastern writers, such as the aforementioned Norma Khouri, Souad, and Azar Nafisi, have published memoirs that are congruent with Euro–American perspectives that demonize Islam and the policies of their home countries in order to establish themselves as part of American or European national

systems. Seemingly supportive of European or American foreign policy, these works gaze at Jordanian, Palestinian, or Iranian cultures from a Western standpoint that Orientalizes their culture as Eastern and, therefore, backward. As neo-Orientalists, these writers “other” their cultures in the process of re-visioning their identities in the West. Yet, while Dabashi effectively points out the flaws in this type of writing, as he does in his criticism of Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, he fails to recognize the positive ways in which writers of this genre are manipulating the role of the native informant to create revisionist histories of the past (“Native Informants”). Though Nafisi is a neo-Orientalist, she is still an agent, writing and transmitting her life story for the world.

I argue that the increasing demand for the memoirs of Arab and Iranian immigrant women, who are expected to personally transcribe their “Otherness” on the written page, results in a sensationalism of this type of life writing that creates the expectation that these writers must serve as cultural representatives. What this results in for the average American reader is an uncritical vacuum, which ignores the nuanced history of the minority culture, while paying careful attention to the hegemonic discourses of the American state. Accordingly, American and European cultures conduct a “double commodification”¹⁹ of minority cultures and literatures. In this case, some publishing houses push Middle Eastern women writers to universalize their experiences of daily life as sociological representations for Western readers. The success of memoir in Europe and America, signals the so-called center’s need for access to “exotic cultures” in the margins, in this case, reflecting America and Europe’s needs to reaffirm the Third World Muslim woman’s native authenticity as part of an imperial project. Whitlock adds that since 9/11, the demand for nonfiction, “particularly books which perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islamic men” resulted in bestsellers, since American readers were anxious to

learn about the dangerous ethnic other (*Soft Weapons* 111). Similarly, Steven Salaita asserts that the growing desire for Arab American works became “too much in demand for its own good” (*Modern Arab* 4).

It is for this reason that in my dissertation, I first open with examples that are the epitome of neo-Orientalist writing. The first chapter, entitled, “True Lies: Sensationalizing Honor-Killing Memoirs,” argues that the two so-called “honor-killing” memoirs, *Forbidden Love* and *Burned Alive*, were successfully believed to be true for more than two years, despite the fact that they were hoaxes, because of the political post-9/11 climate resurrecting Orientalist attitudes about the Middle East. These sensationalized works use Orientalist tropes and became bestselling memoirs, in the process posing many questions about how their deception was successful. Although Muslim women’s memoirs can serve as a forum for creating revisionist histories through female life stories, they also function as narratives written, published, and marketed with the intentionality of producing works that *perform* the native informant’s narrative.

When the memoirs of Norma Khouri and Souad were discovered as hoaxes, alternative readings of this genre became necessary for determining how the hoax challenges notions of authenticity, while also drawing attention to the way in which Muslim writers Orientalize the self to quickly produce memoir. These memoirs are true, in so far that they are part of an Orientalist discourse. On the spectrum of Muslim women’s autobiographical writing, these memoirs can be plotted on its nadir, since they present the average Muslim woman as the stereotypical victim, who is only saved by interfering “Western” sources. This chapter frames my exploration of Muslim women’s memoirs in my three other chapters, which explore texts that both defy these stereotypes and depict a variety of Middle Eastern female voices calling out through the master narratives of Euro–American literatures.

My second chapter, entitled “Comedic Masks, Tragic Faces: Humor, Racial Passing, and Identity Fragmentation in the Memoirs of Firoozeh Dumas and Marjane Satrapi,” argues that the use of humor and satire are formal devices in which Iranian immigrant women can negotiate their precarious and liminal position between two cultures. More specifically, these writers use humor as a metaphorical mask that allows them to partially conceal what they choose to communicate to their readers. Additionally, this masking allows for them to pass for White Americans or Europeans at selected moments in their memoirs. One of the aims of this dissertation is to explore the varying narrative devices that disrupt the conventions of the Euro-American memoir. In the memoirs of Dumas and Satrapi, the authors incorporate humor to critique Iranian, American, and European societies. In her first memoir, Firoozeh Dumas humorously retells her life story in a collection of short stories that mirrors the Scheherazadian tradition of storytelling, blending American humor with Persian storytelling as an artifact of an Iranian American hybrid identity. With each passing story, she entertains her readers with humor, inspiring them to laugh with her at tense political moments.

In *Funny in Farsi* (2003), Dumas uses an American style of humor to ease cultural tension between American and Iranians. Dumas’s memoir is unique in using humor to break through reductive stereotypes that characterize Middle Eastern women as silent, backward, and traditional. In penning her autobiographical narrative after 9/11, she recalls historical racism lodged at Iranians in 1979 in order to change the contemporary revival of hostility against them after 9/11. She complicates the dialogue about Iranians in America, thoughtfully grappling with issues of cultural identity and assimilation in *Funny in Farsi*. Aimed to engage an American readership, the text was produced in 2003 and written with sarcasm in English to demonstrate Dumas’s accessibility and Americanness. Her use of humor allows for the creation of a new,

innovative language, which allows the author to create a space for herself in both the United States and Iran. In so doing, she holds back critiques of American and Iranian domestic and foreign policies, perhaps in a ploy to maintain citizenship in both countries. She uses self-deprecating jokes and mocks her family with a comedic style fueled by American humor, situating herself as simultaneously Iranian and American. If Khouri locates her narrative in Jordan, then Dumas roots hers in America. In a few instances, she critiques the dominant culture through their own eyes in a reversal of the values trumpeted in sensationalist memoirs, such as the honor-killing hoaxes. Her memoir is compelling to look at to determine how Dumas creates a new language pairing humor with autobiography as a way to humanize the Iranian subject in America and to control discussions about them. Her text is invaluable for discussions transitioning between neo-Orientalist writers such as Khouri and Souad, and more writers critical of imperialism, such as Marjane Satrapi.

In her *Persepolis* series, published between 2001 and 2003, Marjane Satrapi elaborates on the conventions of autobiographical writing by creating a graphic memoir that cartoons her past. Through the inclusion of humor and the comic-strip genre, Satrapi creates a language that is able to produce a satirical work that censures aspects of the Iranian Revolution, Iranian culture, and European culture. But most importantly, just as Satrapi exists in a liminal space between Iranian and European identities, so does her memoir, which blends the form of the graphic novel with memoir. She borrows from both the Iranian tradition of political cartooning and the European trend of creating graphic memoirs. Like Firoozeh Dumas, she portrays the straddling of cultures as a fragmentation of the self; yet, Satrapi resolves this internal division differently: through the illustration of her hybrid identity as simultaneously Iranian, French, and Viennese. The pairing of dialogue and illustration allows Satrapi to use the inventiveness of the graphic memoir to express

the trauma of fleeing Iran during the 1979 revolution, living in self-imposed exile in Vienna, and returning to find the inability to assimilate back into Iranian life.

In the group of culturally conscious writers who critically engage national and transnational politics, such as feminist and Islamic issues, I consider writers such as Iranian Marjane Satrapi and Syrian Mohja Kahf as effectively writing narratives that mitigate their position as cultural intermediaries. In so doing, they are able to successfully retell their life stories and identity politics that so often defy nationalist rhetoric. They willingly don the role of cultural intermediary, attempting to explain their culture for the majority of people who do not understand. Considering Marjane Satrapi's position as a Marxist in pre-revolutionary Iran, she upholds an ideology counter to the national ideals of both the Muhammad Reza Shah's royalist regime and the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic. Her work becomes useful for determining an alternative view of the Iranian Revolution, through a communist's perspective that is not typically part of revolutionary and post-revolutionary discourse. Satrapi not only writes her works for her intended audience of "the other ones" who are non-Iranian, but she also presents a revisionist history of the revolution through her perspective, which clearly challenges national discourse that is recorded about the Iranian Revolution (Tully).

Like Satrapi, Mohja Kahf uses her position as a supposed native informant to her advantage in frequently breaking through the stereotypes that mainstream media and the American public hold about Muslims in the United States. In her fictional work as well as in her poetry, Kahf inserts autobiographical aspects that depict the condition of Arab immigrants and Muslim Americans in the United States. In her works, she demonstrates that identity politics is not complicit with American empire, instead suggesting that identity politics are a question of national identity, thereby adopting national discourse. This might be true for writers who attempt

to assimilate and subscribe to the ideology of their newly adopted countries, but for writers such as Satrapi and Kahf—who resist stereotyped images of Muslims, especially about women—they create their own identity politics that respectively defy Iran and Syria’s national discourses, along with France and America’s.

For this reason, Chapter Three, “Mosaics of American Muslims: Reading Islam Across Mohja Kahf’s Poetry and Fiction,” investigates the way in which Mohja Kahf carves out a space for Muslim Americans, especially women, in her semi-autobiofictional works. Though her novel *Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is marketed as a fictional *bildungsroman* about the life of Syrian American Khadra Shamy, it bears the semi-autobiographical perspective of the author, incorporating Kahf’s personal experiences as a Muslim in America. Autobiographical fictions, or “autobiofictions,” allow for the author to incorporate autobiographical elements into their fictional works. Through the use of the omniscient third-person narrator, Kahf is not limited to narrating her own story, but incorporates the stories of the Muslim Arab Americans of her community. By using fiction, she is able to delve into sensitive and somewhat taboo issues surrounding her community, as well as into American politics, without having to claim testimonial authenticity. Ultimately, in her autobiofiction, she is free to paint a diverse picture of Arab American and Muslim women, without being limited to the genre of memoir.

More specifically, a tropological exploration of the *hijab* and its relation to the body yields a space in which the author depicts the protagonist in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and the poetic “I” of her poetic collection, *E-mails from Scheherazad*, as simultaneously Muslim and American. Veiling is a common motif that runs throughout both works, and it is significant, since Kahf attempts to demonstrate the positive and personal expressions of veiling to American audiences. Just as Kahf decenters autobiographical writing in her semi-autobiofictional and

poetic works, so she destabilizes stereotypes about veiling: that it can be backward and oppressive. In order to highlight this destabilization of form, I read across the genres of the novel, memoir, and poetry in her works to show how Kahf creates an innovative language and modality for Muslim American women. In her writing, Kahf infuses feminism and sexuality with issues of race and religion to further highlight the complexity of the contemporary Muslim woman in America. She breaks through American perceptions of Muslim women as a homogenous and victimized group, through her recuperation of the Muslim woman who is simultaneously assertive, sexual, feminist, and religious. This chapter compares both her poetry and fiction to highlight shared themes resisting the essentialization of Muslim women as backward and silent.

My fourth and final chapter, “Dislocations of Self: Unfixing Identity in Rabih Alameddine’s *I, the Divine*,” discusses the way in which the author manipulates form to disrupt the notion of a finished autobiographical subject. Alameddine presents the work as an unfinished memoir written by his protagonist, Sarah Nour el-Din, who is unable to succinctly and chronologically narrate her life story between Lebanon and the United States. Since every chapter begins as “Chapter One,” Alameddine draws attention to the difficulty of succinctly and chronologically writing one’s life story in a memoir, while also engaging the perspective of the autobiographical “I.” In creating a fictional memoir, Alameddine mocks the form of writing so fashionable for contemporary Arab American women writers, and resists rendering his protagonist as a transparent native informant and cultural guide for American readers. He simultaneously manipulates the genre of memoir, mirroring the complexity of writing with the protagonist’s struggle to develop the self, unfixing identity in the process. Moreover, he defies the reader’s expectations of reading a memoir written by a Muslim woman native informant in

the United States, since he frames it from the perspective of a Druze gay man, writing in the fictional memoir of the Druze, straight Lebanese/American Sarah. The framing technique Alameddine uses in his fictional memoir refuses to offer a conclusion for Sarah's life story and text, thereby prolonging the death of both the protagonist and the narrative.

The author uses the unfinished quality of the medium to mirror the protagonist's struggle to contend with her autobiographical identity as both Lebanese and American. Unlike other immigrant writers and protagonists struggling with hybrid identity and ethnic–American identity (particularly those in this study), Sarah Nour El-Din is half American and half Lebanese, the only figure to biologically contain both cultures and ethnicities. Like Satrapi, Dumas, and Kahf, Alameddine humanizes his Arab American subject throughout Sarah's narrative. In her life story, Sarah recalls growing up American in Lebanon and being Lebanese in America, just like Firoozeh Dumas's memoir. Yet, unlike Dumas's memoir, Sarah focuses on the difficulty of finding home in either place, reconciled to living with the inability to choose. It is fitting to conclude this study with this text, which in some ways is a composite of the creative exploration of identity fragmentation presented in texts such as *Funny in Farsi*, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and *Persepolis*. In this final chapter, I conclude with the exploration of how the lines between fiction and nonfiction are blurred to open up alternative spaces of writing Middle Eastern American identity onto the landscape of ethnic–American literature.

Because I compare Norma Khouri, Souad, Firoozeh Dumas, Marjane Satrapi, Mohja Kahf, and Rabih Alameddine, I hope to underscore the diversity of narratives in the body of Middle Eastern women's life writing. Though there have been a few more books and articles surfacing about the field of Iranian and Arab women's autobiographical writings, in comparison to the large numbers of memoirs produced and published every year, there is a need for further

research about these writers and the subgenre of Muslim women's life writing. In this way, this project not only contributes to the growing body of knowledge about Muslim women's autobiographical writings, but it will also offer a critique less frequently discussed, by recognizing the roles of both the writer and the publishing house for producing and marketing these memoirs. My grouping of these writers in my focus on Middle Eastern autobiographical writers, along with my view of these writers as potential native informants, creates a new paradigm for evaluating these authors alongside each other.

Ultimately, the aim of this project is to challenge neo-colonialist assumptions about Arab and Iranian women amid the changing political climate of Euro–American politics since 9/11. By exploring the autobiographical writings of Muslim women emigrating from countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, occupied Palestine, and Iran, I want to show the complexities of their lives and the conditions in which they live contradictory lives in America and Europe. By exploring the exilic cultural production of Arab and Iranian immigrant writers of Muslim background who negotiate the self in conjunction with Euro–American culture, I hope to present to my readers images that counter Muslim women as static, subservient, and downtrodden. In so doing, I determine how, in autobiographical writing, Muslim women narrate their experiences of traversing cultural borders, creating their own cultural identities in the process. Moreover, I investigate how Muslim women writers negotiate their religious identity with respects to global representations of Islam, as well as in relation to countries that alienate them as “other.” I am concerned with the significations of using the genres of memoir and autobiographical writing as vehicles for transmitting the immigrant experience. Thus, this dissertation explores representations of the self as part of life writing to trace the journey of how these women

represent themselves, defy literary convention, and portray perceptions of reality as Middle Eastern writers in the Global North.

¹ My translation.

² Autofiction is a term taken from the French, referring to autobiographical elements of the author that are included in fictions.

³ *Mashreq* is Arabic, and refers to the countries of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt of the Middle East.

⁴ I am referring to Spivak's assertions that in the case of colonial and postcolonial India, elites were, at best, "native informants for first world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other." Based on this notion, I am interested in exploring how ethnic Euro-American writers are negotiating the position of serving as native informants (Spivak 79).

⁵ I do not wish to uphold the "East/West" binary, but instead would like to draw attention to the way that the publishing world intentionally markets Middle Eastern women writers as exotic "others" for audiences of the Global North. I am uneasy using terms such as "East" and "West" and "Third World," because I do not mean to reify them. In order to point out the misrepresentation and exaggeration of Middle Eastern cultures by Euro-American discourses, I first introduce the terms with quotation marks to signal my cynicism, and use it throughout my dissertation without quotation marks with this scepticism in mind.

⁶ I use Global North and Global South to displace the "East/West" binary. Countries part of the Global North are considered as more developed, while countries part of the Global South are less developed and in the process of developing. Though this model resists dividing the world into Eastern and Western halves by cutting the world along Northern and Southern hemispheric lines, it has many flaws in its categorization. It invites sweeping generalizations for countries belonging to each hemisphere, though there are exceptions such as Australia and Monaco, who are in the Southern hemisphere, but in no way developing. I use Global North and Global South to signal the representations associated with each classification.

⁷ Persian words meaning "honor" or "reputation."

⁸ The use of lowercase is the author's.

⁹ I also introduce the term "Third World" with quotation marks to contest this category. The model of the first, second and third world is antiquated and imprecise in referring to the various cultures and communities from developing nations. What I am interested in observing is the representation of women from certain countries as "Third World" and how that representation affects the marketing of memoirs produced by Middle Eastern women in the United States and Europe.

¹⁰ I am not hyphenating Arab American identity because I do not want to situate or categorize identity. Rather, I would like to draw attention and bring awareness to the tension and difficulty in reducing identities to distinct ethnic categories.

¹¹ Though Mernissi has been criticized for her limited knowledge of religious and legal codes, I am, nonetheless, situating her within the context of Islamic feminism, since she aims to subvert gender hierarchies within the framework of Islamic thought.

¹² By publishing in French, Djébar is also bringing her work from the margins of the French empire, into the center via Paris, by publishing her works in the language of the colonizer. This is drawing on Cassanova's center/periphery model of publishing.

¹³ Goli Taraqqi wrote a memoir titled *Scattered Memories*, published in France in 1995. Yet the memoir was half nonfiction and half fiction, which illuminates many Iranian women's hesitations in publishing their life stories. In 2005, Taraqqi told me at the ISIS conference in London that this was due to the fact that her publisher just combined all of her fictional and nonfictional stories into one collection. But, the precedent had been set for ten years, that if you were Iranian and were writing about the self, you must conceal some of the truth, especially if you intended to go back to Iran.

¹⁴ Though it is a difficult political arena to change or maneuver in, it is not as exclusionary toward women, as the American media would portray.

¹⁵ Two terms I use to refer to the epistemological production of area studies concerning non-White American and European minority groups.

¹⁶ I am not hyphenating ethnic–American identities because I do not want to situate or categorize identity. Rather, I would like to draw attention to ethnic–American relationships such as Iranian American or Arab American, bringing awareness to the tension and difficulty in reducing identities to distinct ethnic categories.

¹⁷ Author's emphasis.

¹⁸ Though, as Iranian American author, Nahid Rachlin once reminded me that she was powerless to choose the cover of her novel, *Jumping Over Fire* (2006), nonetheless, we must push publishers to acknowledge the integrity of the author's artistic choices. Not only did the cover of *Jumping Over Fire* depict a veiled woman to signal the protagonist, who is a man, but the veiled woman is incorrectly shown as wearing the Saudi *abaya* instead of the Iranian *chador*. Similarly, Nafisi's cover is Orientalist in its rendering of two veiled girls, looking down dejectedly. After coming under Dabashi's fire, Nafisi has distanced herself from her book cover controversy, neither explicitly confirming or denying or choosing her book cover.

¹⁹ I am referring to Graham Huggan's analysis about "marketing the exotic" in his book, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. While his study is problematic, it is useful for exploring discussions of the commodification of Middle Eastern American writers.

Chapter One

True Lies: Reviving Orientalism in “Honor-Killing” Memoir Hoaxes

As sure as films depicting the Middle East begin with the familiar *adhan*¹ sounding through the dusty desert rooftops at dawn, many memoirs about Middle Eastern women feature a veiled and exotic beauty on their book covers as a way of introducing their work. The covers almost always depict a veiled woman, who is positioned to evade the reader’s gaze with her downcast eyes. The mass production of these memoirs is a more recent phenomenon that marks not only the potential agency that Middle Eastern² women have been *allowed* to assert when narrating their life stories, but conversely, the manufacturing of these memoirs can allow for the global packaging of imperialist propaganda demonizing Muslim countries. As a result, an imperial project is disguised as concern for the condition of women coming from the Third World, and these covers become part of the battleground for empires attempting to broaden their boundaries and jurisdiction.³

In light of the rising popularity of Muslim and Middle Eastern women’s autobiographies that are published in the Global North, one must investigate how these books function within the political landscape of a post-9/11 world and the climate in which these books have been packaged. I use the word *package* to indicate a series of conscious choices that a writer and publisher make to present and authenticate an autobiography, especially through the facilitation and representation of the writer’s personality and background. Autobiographical writing, after all, is just one performance of the self, since the persona of the author substantiates the representation of self in autobiographical works. The author, who is prominently featured on a memoir’s cover, for instance, authenticates the stories told in their confessional works (Smith and Watson *Women, Autobiography* 433).

The staging of a confessional is especially important when considering the subgenre of honor-killing memoirs and how publishers, critics, and authors validate stories about honor crimes through the representation of the mutilated or annihilated body of the subject. On one hand, autobiography allows for Muslim women to speak and assert their agency (especially when they might have been silent before). Yet, on the other, during the publication process, many publishers and interlocutors exploit the tenuous position of a native informant who seeks to represent or speak on behalf of an indigenous or displaced ethnic group within the imperial structure that seeks to suppress them. Even more gravely, there are Middle Eastern women writers who buy into their own victimization, such as Norma Khouri, Souad, Latifah, Azar Nafisi, and Ayaan Hrsi Ali, to name a few. The production of these memoirs following the events of 9/11 marks not only the potential agency that Middle Eastern women have asserted when narrating their life stories, but conversely, the manufacturing of these memoirs can doubly allow for the global packaging of imperialist propaganda demonizing Muslim Middle Eastern countries.

In addition to the growing number of Middle Eastern women's memoirs, there has been an increase of memoirs about honor crimes that Arab women have been producing in the United States and Europe. Without discounting the fact that honor crimes are a serious issue, it must be clear that, in the memoirs, the authors restage antiquated Orientalist binaries, which stereotypically render Muslim women as victims to the brutality of Muslim men. Their exaggeration and, often times, fabrication undermines the severity and legitimacy of an issue as significant as honor crimes.

Because of the increasing anti-Muslim sentiments since 9/11, Middle Eastern writers, such as Norma Khouri and Souad, have published honor-killing⁴ memoirs that are congruent

with Euro–American perspectives demonizing Islam and the policies of their home countries. For more than two years, prior to their discovery as hoaxes, both books were extremely successful in the United States and abroad. To those fooled by the texts, it was completely believable that in Khouri’s text, a Jordanian Muslim woman would suffer an honor crime, especially because she was a Muslim in love with a Christian, or that a Palestinian woman in Souad’s narrative, would be burned for her extramarital affair and pregnancy because she lived in the so-called “Muslim world.” In penning these hoaxes, Khouri and Souad wrote themselves into Euro–American national discourses demonizing the Middle East.⁵ Seemingly supportive of European or American foreign policy, these authors of the aforementioned works evaluate Jordanian and Palestinian culture from a putatively Western standpoint, which reifies the Orientalist views of their culture as backwards. Yet, these writers are neo-Orientalists. They embrace an American or European worldview while exoticizing their cultures as “other.” The memoirs, though falsified, do, operate as truth in an Orientalist framework.

Many readers of autobiography expect that while representing truth in a memoir, a memoirist will balance personal anecdotes with political critique, since her text engages and assesses cultural conflict close to home. Human rights and women’s rights advances due to others’ ability to understand important, personal issues through this kind of testimony. This is especially true for causes that affect women writers who are frequently unseen or misunderstood. Gillian Whitlock speaks about the potential of women’s autobiographical writing in her critical work, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, noting that, since memoirs are able to engage global audiences and humanitarian organizations, they act as “soft weapons” pushing for change (Whitlock 3). Yet, when a memoir vilifies an entire community, religion, or country, it speaks to propaganda, especially when the narrative is supported and promoted by those working within an

imperialist hegemonic structure. While Third World women writers attempt to share their stories with the world, they at times, willingly or unwillingly, take part in a “careful manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere and a management of information in the engineering of consent” (3). These memoirs can, therefore, be manipulated or co-opted for Manichean discourses between either the European or American governments and the Middle East. One must then consider this shift in memoir; where narratives were initially testimonials of personal accounts but have now become products of the so-called “West’s” growing demand for ethnically and culturally diverse life histories.

Now, it seems that there is a blending of both the need to articulate personal experience as well as the desire to cater to global demands for knowledge about the condition of Muslim women. As Chandra Mohanty asserts, the growing circulation of ethnic “Third World” autobiographies and memoirs can be attributed to a European and American desire for diversification of its Eurocentric canons, which search for “exotic” and “different” stories (Mohanty 77). Certainly, this has become the case in a post-9/11 world, where the British and American forces have engaged in long military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is not surprising that contemporary Arab and Muslim memoirs, especially those discussing honor killings, are written, published, and marketed with the intention of producing works that *perform* the native’s narrative.

Of course, it must be recognized that life writing can serve as a medium for revising accepted histories or as a means of speaking out for those who lack access to other forms of resistance. For many Middle Eastern women memoirists, the genre is a means to protest and push for gender equality and socio-political reforms through the creation of a sympathetic autobiographical voice. It seems appropriate to assert that the politically engaged autobiography

seeks to redress the silence of the formerly subaltern women, who now uses writing as a methodology to break through institutional silences. At the zenith of its potential, this kind of testimonial literature is an artifact of protest literature, yet, at its nadir, neo-Orientalist autobiographies are sensationalist pieces speaking to imperialist projects.

“Honor-Killing” Memoirs: Political Testimony or Literary Hoax?

Life narratives are a work of the self and in the process of publishing, editors, writers, and publishing houses package the identity of the author in order to sell the authenticity of the text. The recent publications of narratives of Middle Eastern women have been marketed under the genres of autobiography and memoir, which intend to offer fidelity of history and memory to the reader. Accordingly, the cover of many Middle Eastern memoirs feature the face or figure of the author, or depict a female silhouette to signify a larger work about gender. More often, the women are veiled, to suggest the work is about Islamic issues, even when the author is Christian or Jewish. Because they are memoirs written after significant cultural or political events, the reader expects gestures of sincerity, trusting that the events recounted in the text are fact, with exception to poetic license. Yet, what happens when the author violates this assumed attempt at fidelity, as well as the trust of the reader? What happens when the testimony or memoir is a hoax? More importantly, how does the hoax successfully function as truth for as long as it remains undetected? There is a rupture in Middle Eastern Euro–American memoirs when considering the recent unveiling of honor-killing memoirs as literary hoaxes.

As part of the genre of Third World women’s life writing, this genre of writing oscillates between the *cathartic* and the *catastrophic*. As catharsis, these memoirs act as testimonials that articulate compelling confrontations with violence from the past. Yet, the exaggerated marketing

strategies surrounding these texts help push testimonial inquiry (about masculine aggression against Muslim women) into the realm of catastrophe. Publishers and authors sensationalize these memoirs by presenting them as undisputed sociological representations of Muslim women. When considering the sensationalizing of Arab women's memoirs, two works in particular, Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love (Honor Lost in the United States)* and Souad's *Brûlée Vive (Burned Alive in English)*, compel me to explore the success of honor-killing memoirs published in the Global North. *Forbidden Love* reads like a memoir recounting the honor killing of the author's best friend, while *Burned Alive* resembles a testimonial describing the author's survival of an honor crime. These texts were initially two bestselling honor-killing memoirs, both published in 2003, until they were discovered as literary hoaxes. What is significant about these hoaxes is not that they were fabricated, but that the public literally and figuratively bought the lie for more than two years without much scrutiny.

While the articulation of aggression against women is invaluable for facilitating women's agency, one must also be critical about the role that the authors, publishing houses, critics, and audiences play in the development, publication, and reception of these memoirs, particularly within Euro–American contexts. Norma Khouri's book was celebrated as fact for almost two years before it was uncovered as a fiction and propaganda, while notable scholars and critics, such as Therese Taylor and Gillian Whitlock, have more recently challenged Souad's book. Both authors' simultaneous casting of the author as narrative subject and victimized object fulfills the objectives of a master narrative, staging the West as hierarchically superior to the Middle Eastern and/or Muslim "other."

While the articulation of women's life stories is invaluable to women's agency, I am critical about the role that authors and publishing houses play in the development and publication

of such memoirs. The existence of these hoaxes is, therefore, invaluable for understanding and identifying how some Middle Eastern women writers buy into their own victimization and, more importantly, how audiences from the Global North are ready to believe recycled stereotypes of the alleged primitivism of Muslims. The honor-killing hoax becomes a parody of the veiled bestseller. A closer examination reveals a theatrical portrayal of Orientalist tropes, which brings to light issues about autobiographical authenticity and the Middle Eastern native informant's self-victimization.

Because the lines of nonfiction and fiction are often muddled during the autobiographical retellings of the past, the hoax draws attention to the reader's false need for authenticity, which can never be fully satisfied. The hoaxes regarding Muslim women writers seeking refuge in the West, outrage readers who demand the integrity of the native informant. Incidentally, the authentic Muslim narrative, which so many readers laud, usually justifies the colonizer/imperial mission of saving a Muslim woman from her own culture. But more significantly, the reader's feeling of betrayal derives from having bought (literally and figuratively) the lie. Norma Khouri and Souad's hoaxes are, therefore, significant as cultural artifacts belonging to a post-9/11 era, reminding us about the more gullible reader's expectation that the Muslim world is primitive and barbaric.

When investigating the subgenre of honor-killing memoirs, it becomes clear that the text is packaged as an ethnic performance of the Muslim "other" for global audiences. Not only do I explore how each text functions as a hoax, but I also want to point out how each hoax successfully sold for two years before anyone noticed. Though Khouri and Souad's autobiographies initially read like a memoir and testimonial, respectively, they both similarly recount the violence against Muslim women. When the authors, along with publishers,

sensationalize these memoirs and market them as undisputed sociological representations of Muslim women, the texts unfairly represent Muslim women's issues. These memoirs serve as state-appropriated testimonials reflecting the civilizing mission of the colonial or imperial force.

To investigate the sensationalism of Muslim women's autobiographies, I will first survey the reasons that account for Khouri and Souad's success in selling each lie as truth. In writing about Muslim women, who were victims of honor killings, these two authors attempted to emerge from the periphery and re-locate themselves within the center of empire, in Australia and France, respectively.⁶ Yet, they simultaneously presented themselves as insiders of Jordanian and Palestinian cultures. Though memoir is often a forum wherein women are able to vocalize their life histories as assertive agents, honor-killing memoirs often cast the native informant as a victim. These writers, in particular, partake in fabrication to secure their sense of legitimacy in a Western context.

While I do not discourage the creation of a productive writing space for Middle Eastern women writers, my critique cautions against texts such as Khouri's *Forbidden Love* and Souad's *Burned Alive*, wherein the authors essentialize Muslims as paradoxically threatening and oppressed. They evaluate the Muslim communities in Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank according to European and American Imperialism, unquestioningly fitting into an Orientalist paradigm. They are neo-Orientalist writers, who revive the hierarchical gaze that renders Muslims and the larger Middle Eastern community as inferior to Euro-American empires comprising the imagined West.

Norma Khouri's Supposed "Faction:" Uncovering the Memoir Hoax

On a return journey to Jordan, the supposed native homeland of Norma Khouri's youth, Australian filmmaker Anna Broinowski captures the author in the documentary, *Forbidden Lie*,

justifying the falsities in her faux memoir as “faction—fact and fiction, it’s like *The Da Vinci Code*” (*Forbidden Lie*). But, according to Khouri in her text, her impetus for writing was to push for change in Jordan with her supposedly true story about her friend’s honor killing. Although Khouri assumes the role of the native informant when writing a supposed memoir about honor killings, in light of its denouncement as a literary hoax, she also vilifies all Muslims and justifies Western intercession through her supposed autobiographical account of an honor killing in Jordan.

A year after it was published, in 2004, *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter Malcolm Knox exposed Khouri’s bestseller as a fraud. A brief study of Norma Khouri’s real life, or at least the one that was documented with official papers and records, suggests a very different narrative. Knox uncovered that Khouri’s past was much more complicated because she had only lived in Jordan until she was three years of age and that she had moved to the United States and lived in Chicago from 1973 to 2000. This would explain her American accent and her fluency of English, which for many interviewers was puzzling. Moreover, her upbringing in American schools also affirms her position as more privileged and educated than she depicts herself in the book. She has family living in the United States, whose members claim that she disappeared in 2000 without maintaining contact. She married John Teliopoulos, a Greek American, and has two children with him, though she claims that they are his children from another marriage (Knox “Best-seller’s Lies”). All of these truths were either omitted or changed in her faked memoir.

Norma paints a picture of women who are trying to fight their defenselessness against the tyranny of Muslim Arab men. According to *Forbidden Love*, during the 1990s, Dalia was murdered and Norma feared for her life, since she opposed the honor killing. Yet, according to Knox, during the time of Dalia’s alleged murder, Norma and John were involved in a series of

financial scams in the Chicago area. She fits the mold of a con artist, who in addition to conning her publishers and readers has conned others in the past. After selling her story to publishers, she and her family moved to Australia to act out the charade. When the *Herald* contacted Khouri about these allegations, she conceded that she possessed paperwork stating that she is married to Teliopoulos, but that it was in order to get a Jordanian passport without her father's involvement. She further denied these allegations, stating, "I have only ever been to America after the book was published on a publicity tour, I have never had an American passport" (Knox). Yet, Jordanian authorities have stated that Norma was issued an American passport, valid for ten years on March 26, 1996.

In response to the allegations in her book, Jordanian readers, including humanitarian workers, were outraged. An investigation by the director of the women's commission in Amman, Amal al-Sabbagh, and Jordanian journalist and women's rights activist Rana Hussein proved that Khouri's story was false on multiple levels. Hussein, who more recently published her own account of honor killings in Jordan entitled *Murder In the Name of Honor*, is a noted activist in Jordan. She conducted a page-by-page analysis of the book, along with al-Sabbagh, and found seventy-three errors pertaining to the locations, geography, history, culture, and Islamic practices discussed in the book (Whitlock 109). The most numerous errors surround Khouri's portrayal of Amman's life and culture, referring to buildings not built until after the 1990s, for instance. In the opening of the book, she incorrectly describes the geography of Jordan, placing it next to Kuwait. Moreover, Hussein maintains that the unisex salon, at the center of the book, could not exist by law and was not remembered by the union of Amman's hairdressers. Al-Sabbagh assessed the damage, stating, "She ruined the reputation of Jordanian women, saying they were imprisoned in their homes and so on. Jordanian women have excellent education levels that are

gradually being translated into participation in the workforce. Her tone is that all Jordanian women live under these traditional practices, which is wrong” (Knox “The Lies”).

Through her narrative, Khouri justifies attitudes that support Western military intercession in the Middle East. The fact that she had so many inaccuracies and falsities in her text disconcerted no one for the first year of its publication, since it was congruent with the motives of Euro–American imperial expansion. As columnist Andrew Bolt points out, “Why not lie, when it works so well that Rigoberta Menchu won a Nobel peace prize through her even more faddish fibbing in her *I, Rigoberta Menchu?* The Khouri hoax becomes the latest episode in a history of fakes, frauds and fibbers which links together a series of testimonies and autoethnographies in the recent past by those who bear the most sacred marks of victimhood, and particularly that ethnic thing” (Whitlock 110). The comparison to Rigoberta Menchu is compelling, since both authors have been found to embellish and change facts pertinent to the description of culturally and politically significant events.⁷ Indeed, the comparison to the Latin American *testimonio* hoax is reminiscent of the fact that most testimonials are highly mediated and that these genres are produced within colonial and postcolonial contexts (Kaplan 211). Yet, this is a memoir controlled by the author, who attempts to pass off fiction as fact. It is not a testimonial such as Souad’s *Burned Alive*, which is mediated through the use of an interlocutor, translator, and editor.

Khouri’s hoax is ethnically performative, as it casts stereotypes in the roles of the ethnic Muslim “other,” creates hyperbole through its exaggeration and dehumanization of Muslims, and victimizes Muslim women as unable to assert their own agency. The story stages an elaborate production, vilifying the so-called Orient against a Western backdrop, potentially creating propaganda for any government wanting to attack an Arab or Muslim nation. This specifically

points to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which prefigured the publication of Khouri's text, though not the writing of it. Though she could not have predicted the date of the invasion, after the catastrophic events of 9/11, it had become clear that former-President George Bush and former-Prime Minister Tony Blair had an agenda to invade Iraq with the purpose of unarming the nation of its supposed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Khouri, who plays the role of the authoritative Arab cultural interpreter, feeds on the image of a threatening Middle East by privileging Western values as representational of universal values in her book. She packaged a narrative that spoke to the post-9/11 rhetoric of the "war on terror," legitimating Euro-American assertions about the Middle East from the perspective of a supposed cultural insider. She revived Oriental tropes to legitimate her narrative to Anglophone audiences who expected a harrowing tale about women in the Middle East. But, what distinguishes her from other Orientalist writers is that as part of the resurgence of neo-Orientalist writers, she controls the information she disseminates and, in this way, she is still the agent of her own story. As the ultimate hoaxer and trickster, she forges a memoir that mirrors the prejudices of Global Northern societies who anticipate nothing but barbarism from Middle Eastern cultures.

After Khouri's text was uncovered as a hoax, journalists, bloggers, publishers, and editorial writers speculated about the way in which readers have a neurotic obsession for learning about the lives of the ethnic "other." According to HarperCollins' publishing director, Shona Martyn, Khouri's success benefited from a post-9/11 global environment, "particularly books which perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islamic [sic] men" (Whitlock 111). The editorial in the *Australian* agrees that Khouri "appeared to be a brave woman standing up for the rights of women in a brutal sexist society. In presenting Middle Eastern men as violent bigots, she had a plot custom-made for our times" (*Australian* July 30, 2004). Western audiences could not ask for

a better text to unquestioningly demonize all Muslims as violent and backward. The narrative is written from a first-person perspective that reads in sync with Orientalist literature hailing from the West. This notion is especially substantiated since Khouri writes from her position as a Christian critiquing the practices, values, and culture of Muslims in Jordan.

In addition to literary critics and journalists, global audiences began questioning the ethical investment of authors such as Norma Khouri. Only a few literary critics have worked on autobiographical hoaxes, namely Australian professors Gillian Whitlock and Therese Taylor, in addition to columnists Malcolm Knox and Andrew Bolt. Since there have been a few hoaxes in recent years in Australia, it seems that academics, journalists, and readers are more wary of autobiographical claims and much of the criticism is located “down-under.” Their contribution is certainly helpful, but a further exploration of the hoax is needed to make way for comprehension about the narrative strategies of neo-Orientalist autobiographies and hoaxes.

This literary hoax is no less important to American criticism than it is to Australian critiques, since it raises questions about the sensationalism of Middle Eastern women’s memoirs. Muslim women’s memoirs and hoaxes must become the object of deeper inquiry here in the United States, in order to cut through embellishments and exaggerations vilifying Islam. In terms of American hoaxes, we have our own. The most recent literary hoax⁸ in the United States is James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), which supposedly detailed a man’s struggle with addiction and his heroic recovery. According to the James Frey, his text was embellished to help those fighting addictions. After it was revealed it was a hoax, Frey received the wrath of readers and the literati, including a seething Oprah, who pulled the backing of her famed book club from the text’s support. In his infamous pre-hoax interview with Oprah, Frey stated that, “If I was gonna write a book that was true, and I was gonna write a book that was honest, then I was

gonna have to write about myself in very, very negative ways” (“A Million Little Lies”). How ironic that for the public to accept truth, the author chose to create lies. More recently, with the release of his newest work, *The Final Testament of the Holy Bible*, a novel about a modern-day messiah in New York, when asked about the blending of fact and fiction in his work (especially in reference to his faked memoir), the author states, “It’s a book. It’s a story. The point of what I do is that it doesn’t really matter what a book or a story is as long it moves you, informs you, challenges you, entertains you, or changes you” (Dana “James Frey’s Religious Awakening”). If that is what the author believes, then why not initially market *A Million Little Pieces* as a novel instead, especially since the message is so compelling? Why present the fiction as a memoir in the first place?

An investigation of Norma Khouri’s hoax could provide the answer to why memoir hoaxes are marketed as nonfiction and not fiction. After reading her text and watching numerous interviews, I posit that Khouri was motivated to publish a memoir for two reasons: firstly, to use the façade of truth to garner international attention and, secondly, to acquire personal financial gain and celebrity through that notoriety. If her interviews are taken at face value, then she claims to be passionate about reaching international audiences, organizations, and peacekeeping entities such as the United Nations to push for the abolishment of honor killings. Whether it is for policy intervention or global recognition, Khouri published her supposed memoir in international markets to gain notoriety. Secondly, since Khouri presented the story of her supposed friend’s honor killing to the international community, then she became the star and beneficiary of a worldwide media campaign, full of book tours and high sales. She stood to make a lot of money and garner fame through a nonfictional text, since more recently, memoirs are more in vogue among readers, especially those who are fascinated with the lives of others.

Memoirs and blogs have been becoming the literary voyeurism equivalent to reality television shows, since there seems to be a compulsion to document the self in various mediums of life writing. It seems that in masquerading a fictional honor killing as truth, a hoaxer such as Khouri attempts to present this fabrication as a truthful memoir and social account of Muslim women, while at the same time boosting her representation as a best-selling memoirist.

The writer's own inventiveness in fabricating a hoax is just as important as the audience's willingness to buy it. Khouri aptly understands the demands of the market and the post-9/11 political climate. Despite claims that she desires to write in the memory of her slain friend, the impetus to publish is Khouri's acknowledgment of the so-called West's fascination with the East. She conflates violence with an Arab and Muslim identity, stating, "As incomprehensible as the violent acts against non-Muslims, non-Arabs, that, since 11 September, have made the Western world suddenly hungry to understand this alien place. They read scholars, watch TV pundits" (Khouri 57). Khouri does not mention the fact that Muslims also perished on 9/11 and were severely affected by post-9/11 prejudices lodged at them. As Steven Salaita notes, because Arabs were grossly misrepresented in American society, especially after 9/11, Khouri had the ability to create a persona who preys on the sociopolitical expectations of her readers. She capitalizes on the "long-standing American fantasy that its moral and cultural superiority can be substantiated vis à vis the barbaric East" (Salaita *Arab American* 99). Aware of the interest about the exotic and alien Muslim/ Middle Eastern other, Khouri profits from the perception that the Middle East is "hot"

The emergence of Khouri's hoax in 2005 was timely and continues to be informative for discussions about imperialist campaigns that deem Middle Easterners as unequivocally violent and threatening. The text was first published in 2003 as *Forbidden Love* in Australia and later

that year as *Honor Lost* in the United States. Though Khouri is a Christian and not a Muslim, I situate her memoir with other narratives depicting Muslim women's lives because the text focuses on the honor killing of Dalia, her Muslim friend, and discusses in length (however inaccurately) Islamic history, religion, and law. The memoir itself is emblematic of a post-9/11 mode of thinking, which, from the imperial perspective, seeks to understand the native informant and the culture it seeks to dominate or control. What is fascinating about literary hoaxes such as *Forbidden Love* is that it is able to enliven the debate about neo-Orientalist writing, not just for academics, but for global audiences, as well. With a hoax, everyone becomes a critic.

Forbidden Love, Forbidden Lies: Finding Truth in Orientalism

After it was accepted that Khouri's text was a fake, most publishers temporarily withdrew their backing of the project. In response to Knox and Hussein's allegations, Random House released statements about their concerns, stating "in good faith, we are mindful that the issue concerning the author's true identity was central to her fleeing Jordan as she describes in the book." Two days after the scandal was revealed, Random House in Australia announced that *Forbidden Love* had been withdrawn from sale "pending requested receipt of evidence from its author that the book is a true representation of her life and experiences" (Random House). Though the Australian and British publishers withdrew the book as a testimonial, American publishers rereleased it as a novel, omitting any references to it as a true story.

While publishers washed their hands clean of the project, journalists, critics, and, in one case, the aforementioned filmmaker, Anna Broinowski, got their hands dirty with the implications of the hoax. Broinowski's initial interest in creating her feminist line documentary, *Forbidden Lies*, stemmed from her desire to validate Khouri's claims. Yet, after a year of filming and traveling between Jordan, Australia, and the United States, Broinowski could not

validate Khouri's claims or save the author from herself. What the filmmaker created instead was a compelling body of entertaining interviews and sound bites, which render Khouri as a pathological liar (Whitlock "Remediating" 364). This attempt to recuperate Khouri reads along a Western feminist objective that has played a major role in the initial acceptance of memoirs such as *Forbidden Love*. After all, if *Forbidden Love* is to be taken at face value, then it would read as a compelling narrative about one woman's determination to speak on behalf of honor-crime victims. Along Western feminist lines, this narrative makes sense, where a supposedly more progressive woman attempts to combat the backward nature of the Muslims and liberate Muslim women from the imprisonment of their culture and religion.

Perhaps in anticipation of the nuclear fallout that could occur if her memoir were discovered as a hoax, Khouri opens her memoir with the disclosure that "memory" is the reason for inaccuracies in the text. In the first publication of the text, the author invokes the leeway that many memoirists claim: "This story is true to my memory and experiences. Pseudonyms have been used and details altered to protect the identity, privacy and safety of people mentioned in this book" (Khouri 1). Through the structure of a memoir, a woman writer can often write around censoring audiences by conceding that the events of the text are based on personal memory, acknowledging, in essence, that such memory might be flawed (Martinson 2). This consequently, relieves the narrator of political responsibility and authentic accountability.

In later editions, this disclaimer was omitted, and the book was published as fiction (though the jacket does not explicitly state to which genre the text belongs). The omission of the disclaimer is evidence of the work's inauthenticity. Yet, with so many inaccuracies in the text, it becomes clear that in this particular moment in the world of publishing, publishers are eager to market the "misery memoirs" of Muslim women, failing to check the authenticity of the claims.

As long as they read along Orientalist lines, a hoax about Muslims can be easily published with much success and without much scrutiny in terms of its illegitimacy.

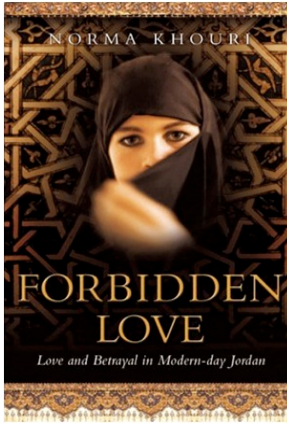
Despite all the inaccuracies and falsities of the book, one must explore how this fake memoir attained the success that it did for at least a year before anyone found out. In less than two years, the book sold more than 200,000 copies in Australia, with 40,000 copies printed in the UK and 50,000 copies printed in the United States (Knox). By looking at the sensationalist attitudes surrounding Muslim women's life narratives and the memoir boom that is shaping the market, it is not surprising that Norma Khouri was ushered in as a best-selling author. With promotions from prior successful memoirists, such as Jean Sasson, who wrote the biographical *Princess* trilogy, it becomes clear that to secure her text within the genre of Middle Eastern women's biographies and autobiographies, Khouri relied on Sasson to legitimate her memoir. On the back cover, Sasson writes, "Norma Khouri's courage and candour takes us into the hearts and minds of a world that is usually cloaked in mystery ... This extraordinary true story is well told, worth telling, and impossible to put down." Sasson's quote appears in later editions, but publishers omit her use of the phrase "true story." Sasson's endorsement justifies and contextualizes Khouri's text for Euro-American audiences who trust her voice. Sasson's stamp of approval legitimates the text, since she serves as a "powerful broker" between the reader and the writer (Whitlock 114). After sifting through fact and fiction and blatant promotions by Australian, British, and American publishing houses, Khouri's faux memoir does not speak to truth, but to propaganda campaigning against Muslim countries. Yet, in an Orientalist framework, her lies read as truth.

***A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words:
Orientalist Readings of Norma Khouri's Book Covers***

Because Khouri claims the purpose of her text is to raise questions about Muslim women's rights, she introduces the topic by featuring a veiled woman on her book cover. Both her Australian and British/American edition book covers are symbolic of the supposedly silent Muslim woman. To evaluate the commodification of Middle Eastern women's memoirs, it is first important to survey the paratextual properties of the text and gauge the relationship between the text and the reader.⁹ The sensationalism of Muslim women writers begins with their marketing strategies: most visibly through their book covers.

Most book covers of contemporary Muslim memoirs feature veiled women. For instance, when considering the cover of popular Muslim women's memoirs, such as Leila's *Marriage by Force*, Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honor*, Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love*, and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,¹⁰ one sees the repeated use of veiled women, who are often set against an embellished oriental backdrop. By using the veil as the iconic figure on the cover of memoirs, publishers as well as authors, such as Nafisi and Khouri, package their texts as the exotic and authentic. Using these covers as an example, these memoirs employ a repetitive visual and literary reframing of the Muslim female subject. Some avoid making eye contact, while others possess a frank gaze with dramatically made-up eyes. They are often abstracted onto the cover, or cropped and repositioned in some way. The framing device creates a narrow focus that not only renders women as abject, but as object in terms of desire. Moreover, this reframing becomes a metaphor for Orientalist projects, which crop and edit Middle Eastern women's life stories to fit the paradigm of the victimized Muslim woman.

When first evaluating the peritext of this book vis-à-vis its cover, the veiled face on *Forbidden Love* visually solicits the gaze of the reader. On the Australian and British versions of



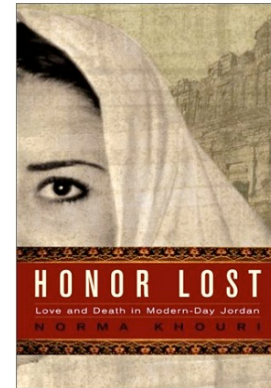
(Random House Australia)

her book covers, the text features a veiled woman set against a flourishing of “Oriental” design in the background. The ornate backdrop is composed of interlacing geometrical patterns commonly used in Islamic art. The aesthetic ornamentation signals the early and medieval periods of Islamic art, which incorporate this design into the architecture of palaces and mosques. In the foreground of the text, there stands a woman, caught in the act of either drawing her veil over

her mouth, or beginning to uncover the veil. If the figure is covering her mouth, she silences herself, yet, if she is uncovering herself, then the staging of the veil simultaneously suggests desire for her as object, and perhaps her rebellion in speaking through the act of memoir.

The combination of the backdrop and the veiled woman, which both reference the antiquity of tradition and religion, seem to reinforce the text’s title: *Forbidden Love: A Harrowing True Story of Love and Revenge in Jordan*. Of course, after the text was discovered as a hoax, publishers such as Transworld Publishers (based in the UK) omitted Khouri’s claim that it was a “true story” and changed the subtitle to “Love and Betrayal in Modern-Day Jordan.” In the case of the latter-2004 edition, the use of Islamic art that is paired with the image of a veiled woman, contrasts with the expectations of “modern-day” Jordan denoted in the title. Regardless of the varying subtitles, the presentation of both covers seems to signal qualities of the veiled bestseller, which presumably discusses gender, ethnicity, and the defiance of Islamic tradition.

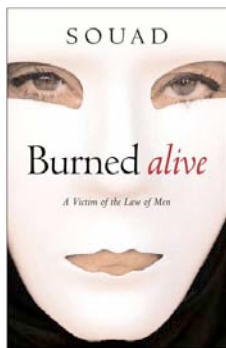
Similar to the Australian and British editions of her text, Khouri's American book cover features a veiled woman, foregrounding the Muslim woman as the subject of the work. It also depicts another kohl-lined and veiled woman, but this time, according to Khouri, it is supposed to be Dalia herself, taken from a photograph of Khouri and Dalia together (*Forbidden Lie\$*). The figure is set against the ancient ruins of Petra, marking the "exotic" locale of Jordan. The significance of the backdrop on the cover of *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern-Day Jordan* points to the history of the Nabataens who built Petra and ruled the surrounding areas during the sixth century B.C.E. The reference to both the site and the ancient history of Jordan suggests a continuity of tradition for the veiled woman on the cover. The publisher and the author suggest that the woman must adhere to ancient traditions and codes, whether they are pre-Islamic and Islamic.



(Atria Books)

Visually speaking, the woman's mouth and other facial features, save for her eyes, are omitted and obscured by both the text's title and subtitle, which equate love with the loss of honor and "death." The block of text obscures the female figure's mouth, and as with the Australian cover, it is not visible. By concealing the mouth in both editions, the covers attempt to visually mark the silence of all Third World Muslim women, whom Euro-American audiences presume cannot speak. Their only visible facial feature is their eyes, which stare straight into those of the reader/viewer. Both figures return the reader and viewer's gaze, not in defiance, but to generate desire. Their eyebrows are well plucked, and their eyes heavily made up with kohl to visually illustrate the notion that under the veil, there is a beautiful Muslim woman waiting to be rescued.

Just as on the cover of Khouri's book, Souad's testimonial hoax, *Burned Alive*, features a veiled woman, except it is a more disturbing rendition, depicting a woman with a white surgical mask. On the cover of the original French version of *Brûlée Vive* (2003), Souad is fully masked, except for her eyes and mouth. As on the cover of Norma Khouri's texts, the figure's eyes are



(Katz Pictures)

also made up with eyeliner and mascara, to mimic the exotic Muslim woman often featured on the veiled bestseller. The title *Brûlée Vive* is transposed over Souad's nose, reminding the reader that what lies underneath is unseen deformity. The mask is a reminder of the tragedy that it is covering—it is said to be a mask that Souad always wears during her speeches at conferences. Ultimately, it reminds the reader that the

burned face and body are the spectacle driving the testimonial forward.

Similarly, on the cover of the English translation of Souad's book, the text features the same image, a menacing mask that hints at a scarred face beneath. Accordingly, the peritexts on both covers attempt to authenticate the memoir as the "first true account ever published by a victim of an honor crime," or "the shocking, true story of one woman's escape from an 'honor' killing (Souad)."¹¹ Yet, Souad's claims begin to crumble. The reader learns that, despite the cover's suggestions, Souad's face was not damaged in the supposed fire. This is just one instance of a misleading aspect in the book, which, like Norma Khouri's, is full of inconsistencies and contradictions.

By presenting veiled women on these covers, publishers invite both male and female readers to voyeuristically gaze upon the subject of the text, thereby rendering her as simultaneously subject and potential object. The images on the covers are ambivalent: on one hand, they visually introduce the Muslim woman author or, in this case, narrative subject, around

whom the narrative is organized; on the other hand, the text could be partially written by a European interlocutor interviewing the speaker, who depicts her as an object in need of saving. To put this into Lacanian terms, the cover presents a narrow field of vision, which the publisher carefully selects and crops for the reader. The positioning of the female figure in the center, or near the center, of the foreground reifies the veiled Muslim women as object of the gaze. This *scotia*, or impairment of vision, renders both covers' veiled figures vulnerable to the voyeurism of the viewer (Rose 5). The gaze of the voyeur seemingly produces shame in the field of the "other."

Building a gender critique on this notion, Laura Mulvey suggests that the first voyeuristic act arises when using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight, that is, through the gaze.¹² This is not dissimilar to Faegheh Shiraz's observations about the Euro-American practice of using veiled women to represent the exotic and taboo in advertisements and the media.¹³ Pleasure in looking has been split between the active male and the passive female, and the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto female figure (Mulvey 6). Even the title of Khouri's first edition book, *Forbidden Love*, is demonstrative of the concealed, but sexualized, Muslim woman.

In addition to the male gaze, there is also a solicitation of the female viewer's voyeurism, since female audiences are avid readers of this genre and wish to learn more about the supposedly backward lives of Muslim women. In the case of Khouri's two editions, her book covers simultaneously render veiled Muslim women as sexually forbidden and prisoners of the veil, popular notions among Orientalist feminists, who deem the veil as a mechanism of control by barbarous regimes. Many women believing themselves to be progressive feminists might call for the unveiling of Muslim woman in order to liberate them from a supposedly backward and

imprisoning act. But, in so doing, they operate in an Orientalist framework that champions a Western paradigm for the advancement of women.

To further complicate either the masculine or feminine gaze, the veil functions simultaneously as the preserver for women's privacy and instigator for the viewer's curiosity about the object's life. For instance, in his work *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy suggests that veiling in visual imagery and cinematography becomes the signifier for the boundary between public and private, thus protecting the privacy of the individual onscreen. In his cogent discussion of Middle Eastern film, veiled women allow for mobility on screen, but also motivate viewers to distrust their vision and search for the hidden, inner meanings (Naficy 10). A dialectical relationship, therefore, forms between veiling and unveiling: that which is covered is also capable of being uncovered. It is not so surprising that the veil is so often used on the covers of Muslim women's (read: "Third World" with a capital "T," "backward," and "traditional") life writings in order to signify the act of disclosing the concealed self as part of the genre of autobiography.

***Playing to the Crowd:
Reviving Orientalist Tropes in Middle Eastern Women's Memoirs***

Moving from the text's book covers to the work's plot, the content of Khouri's faux memoir supports the cover's initial representation of the Muslim woman as victim and object. The plot centers on Norma's best friend, Dalia, who has a secret love affair and is consequently killed by her father to salvage her family's honor. Despite warnings against religious amalgamation in Jordan, Dalia, who is a Muslim, dares to become involved with a Christian man, Michael, and thus warrants the wrath of her family. Supposedly, Norma and Dalia were childhood friends who opened up a unisex hair salon they named after themselves [N&D's] in

Amman during the early 1990s. Despite Khouri's insistence of the innocence of the relationship between Dalia and Michael, upon his discovery of her illicit relationship, Dalia's father brutally stabs and kills Dalia. After the supposed honor killing, Norma claims that, in fear, she had to flee Jordan and escape to Athens, where she wrote the book, and eventually immigrated to Australia.

By writing about the Muslim "other" through a Christian perspective, Khouri uses religious rhetoric from her own background to critique and essentialize all Muslims as violent and backward. Simply put, they are from the *wrong* faith, and this difference is highlighted repeatedly throughout the text. Though both Norma and Dalia share similarities in the story, such as their place of birth and childhood, Khouri highlights their fatal difference: Dalia is Muslim, while Norma is Catholic. Yet, despite the focus on their religious difference, the author also seems to blame all Arab men for violence against women. In her text, she claims that all Jordanian women are oppressed by the same "universal Arab creed," which uses Bedouin codes to relegate women to the domestic and private spheres. According to Khouri, the Bedouin traditions are inherent to all Jordanian men, as they are "always nagging at men's instincts, reminding them that under the Westernizing veneer, they are all still Arabs" (Khouri 2). Khouri demonizes all Jordanian men in her book, save for Michael, who is Christian and, therefore, for her, redeemable. It is this type of rhetoric, valorizing the Christians and demonizing the Muslims, that allowed the book to function as truth in the West for almost two years before it was realized as a hoax (since Christianity carries with it, historical, religious, and social privilege).

In her story, Khouri casts Dalia in the stereotypical role of the victimized Muslim woman in need of saving. To reframe her narrative as a fictional work, I often use the word "story," and refer to the author as "protagonist," and Dalia as a "character." Khouri's text reads more like a well-scripted drama that unfolds like a novel, rather than as a memoir giving testimony

throughout its pages. The author introduces the victim, Dalia, as a beautiful girl, who fits the paradigmatic beauty of a veiled Odalisque. Khouri continues to call Dalia *ya gazallae*, likening her to a gazelle, and explaining to her readers that “*ya gazallae* is slang for especially attractive women—those with the melting eyes of a baby deer, like Bambi” (Khouri 12).¹⁴ Khouri describes her heroine as innocent, unsuspecting, and timid as a dear; subsequently, she is a Bambi-like figure recognizable to her Western audience. Dalia is seemingly the woman on the cover of Khouri’s work, whose beauty is simultaneously concealed and enticing. She is the victim in need of saving, and she is also the object of masculine desire.

By repeating the Arabic phrase *ya gazallae* throughout the text, Khouri attempts to perform her Jordanian identity for her readers by peppering her narrative with transliterated Arabic. She represents herself as the ethnic Arab “other,” a modern day Sheherazade who entertains her readers with her stories. This is especially significant once we learn that the text was a hoax and the author was raised in the United States, since memoirists legitimate their memoirs through an authentic representation of the self. Though in this instance, she uses the Arabic *ya gazallae* correctly, in other instances she misuses Arabic. One such example is when she incorrectly uses the word *shar’ia*, meaning Islamic law, to stand in for the veil. For instance, when describing Dalia’s veiling, Khouri misuses *shar’ia*, stating, “Her graceful body is sheathed in the long, loose folds of a *shar’ia* and her hair is hidden by a veil. Dalia has worn the *shar’ia* since she was ten, which for women is the beginning of adult life” (Khouri 56). Her use of this word is not metaphorical; she confuses *shar’ia* with *hijab*, the Arabic word for the Islamic veil. Because publishers and editors did not research the memoir’s claims prior to publication, they did not notice the mistakes and presented the text as nonfiction. I draw attention to this oversight

to emphasize the way in which Khouri's European and American publishers and readers were eager to encounter a story that operates in both Orientalist and Manichean terms.

Keeping with Orientalist tropes, Khouri uses the motif of silence to signal the absence of Muslim women's voices in her text. She is able to break through the silence, since she is a Christian and relocates to the West. Khouri evidences the barbarous act of murdering Dalia for preservation of family honor as the chief driving force for speaking out and writing her faux memoir. After Michael and Dalia are discovered to have a secret liaison, Dalia's father and brother stab her in her own home. In response to this traumatic event, Khouri recalls, "Losing Dalia in this way made vivid to me something I'd always known but had managed to ignore. I could no longer hide my true emotions and beliefs in the hope my silent cries would be heard. In memory of Dalia, I vowed to transform my silence into audible screams for justice and equal rights" (145). Khouri sets the stage for a politically productive honor-killing memoir, which invokes the transformational quality of autobiography to voice dissent against honor crimes. She seemingly undermines her position as powerless, by equating the acts of writing and speaking with those of protest against the patriarchal state, in the hope of recuperating women's voices. For her voice to be heard, Khouri relies on the reader to listen, read, and bear witness to her testimony of Dalia's death, especially since she never witnesses Dalia's death. The audience's engagement with and support of the text is necessary to sell the hoax as truth.

Khouri also uses the motif of speaking throughout her text, equating speaking with agency, which, according to her, is available only in the West. She diagnoses the limiting factors prohibiting women's agency in Jordan: the Eastern cultural and religious codes that silence women. Before her text was proven as a hoax, Khouri gave an interview with Uma Girish, wherein she states, "Life in the West is wonderful, but I still feel guilty because I have these

rights and the women that I know and love in Jordan still do not have access to these rights. It has changed me, it has made me more confident, and has given me a bigger mouth” (Khouri in Girish). Khouri visually recalls the image of her big mouth, her tool for agency that seems to only exist once she flees to Europe.

Khouri stages her ability to speak for Dalia through the paradigm, suggesting that those in the West are freer to speak than are those in the East. After Mahmood, Dalia’s father, kills Dalia, Norma vows, “I will not rest until her death is avenged. You’ll pay for this senseless slaughter” (Khouri 141). She continues, “I will *not* be silent. I will not allow my silence to condemn her. Dalia did nothing wrong! I will defend her actions to my dying day” (148). This is certainly antithetical to her assessment of the “code of silence that surrounds an honor killing,” which prompts Norma to speak out (155). She presents herself as resisting the imposition of silence, attempting to defy Jordanian social and moral codes through her verbal protest. It is through the act of writing, in which Khouri presents the reader with the corpus of her testimony as evidence for the honor crime, since she is never able to produce evidence of Dalia’s corpse in her post-hoax interviews.

Khouri further pairs the binaries of silence and speaking with the East and the West when she discusses her reasons for writing her testimonial. At the text’s closing, a charged Khouri exclaims, “I realize that she left me with a mission. It’s a task I must undertake, a goal I pray to reach. I must find a way to expose honor crimes for what they truly are: legalized murder. To break through the official Jordanian code of silence and find a way to make all Arab women’s silent cries for justice and freedom heard throughout the world” (205). The repetition of “silence” is indicative of the author’s monolithic portrayal of Muslim women. Her indictment of the Jordanian penal codes implicates the state as legitimating honor killings, when in fact the

Jordanian government outlaws them. To the average, less-discerning Australian, British, or American reader, however, this does not seem such an outrageous claim. For Americans, in particular, it is not surprising to suspect a Middle Eastern country of foul play, since the text was published two years after 9/11 and just after the American invasion of Iraq.

By analyzing the themes, tones, and views in the text, it reads like a narrative written from a very American perspective, without cultural sensitivity. Khouri uses the act of writing her memoir as her final act of defiance. Her memoir, which was primarily published for Anglophone audiences, positions her as the native informant who translates, critiques, and even condemns Jordanian customs for Western audiences of the American and British empires. In her text, Khouri states, “I realize that my words alone will not change what is happening, but I hope that they will bring light to what has been shrouded in darkness for centuries ... And I pray that whoever reads this book, and hears the words I have been able to find, will voice their outrage, as I have here” (208). Not surprisingly, Khouri uses the antiquated pairing of light and dark imagery to render the East as enveloped in darkness (which is also reminiscent of the habitual wearing of black veils), while also illuminating the West as enlightened and luminary, consistent with the notion of the civilizing mission of empire.

In critiquing Khouri and her faux testimonial, I do not wish to diminish the severity and frequency of honor crimes; rather, I wish to draw awareness to a revival of Orientalist ideas that position Euro–American countries as hierarchically superior to Muslim nations. In the final section of the first printing of the Australian edition of *Forbidden Love*, Khouri urges her Western readers to help use their position as Westerners to fight against Muslim women being subjected to honor crimes. Though it was omitted in later editions of her book, Khouri’s text concludes with the following section:

What Can You Do? A lot! A campaign is now underway to bring an end to honor crimes. Everyone can help signing e-mail petitions, writing letters of objection or donating to United Nations approved organizations that are working for women's rights. In fact, the voices of people in Western nations are particularly powerful because Jordan is desperate to give the impression that it's a modern, democratic state. (Khouri)

To complete the fabrication of her text, Khouri urges her Western readers to act and help reform Jordan. The passage is just one more reminder about the text's philosophy, which echoes the "civilizing mission" of the West, a movement that aims to bring order to the chaotic and uncivilized East.

The aforementioned passage exists as the perfect staging of a neo-Orientalist text in the twenty-first century, since it esteems the West and vilifies the East. Khouri claims to have written the text in Greece, otherwise known as the birthplace of Western civilization. What better place to pen an honor-killing tragedy, which could have been averted by the civilizing customs of the former Greek Empire? Khouri published the first edition in Australia, and so her narrative is packaged for Western readers. The text's high commercial success in Australia during the first two years of publication further substantiates the notion that to many Western readers, the events were completely plausible and true.

One of the reasons that this memoir hoax was successful was because it supported Manichean tropes that othered Arabs as inferior in comparison to Euro-Americans, which creates a narrative that is understandable and acceptable to Western readers. In her film, *Forbidden Lie*, Broinowski offers compelling evidence of this notion as she investigates the hoax, providing the public with the most abundant post-hoax coverage of Khouri. About his

interview with Khouri, Australian writer David Leser admits that one of the reasons the hoax was so successful was because:

We were fascinated by stories of the Middle East. We were fascinated by the Arab man. Here is a prepossessing woman coming out of that place and showing us how almost this burka, this giant burka had come out of the horizon and had enveloped her and enveloped women and was going to envelope us if we didn't watch out. (Broinowski, 2007)

It is ironic that when speaking about why the text was stimulating and important to Australian audiences (and why the hoax was such a betrayal), Leser resuscitates many Orientalist clichés in the process. In the film, Leser is shown as having interest in helping Middle Eastern women and writers hailing from the region, yet, it is obvious that he operates from within Orientalist binaries that presume all Muslim women are victims. Perceiving the threat of the Middle East and the Arab man, Leser points out that the act of uncovering the Middle East was fascinating to Western readers. He incorrectly uses the word burka, as do many, to describe the full-length hijab, drawing attention to the aesthetics of Muslims, yet again.

This act of uncovering the forbidden and threatening Middle East is precisely what drives the readership of memoirs about Middle Eastern women forward. Often, memoirs written by Middle Eastern women with Muslim backgrounds, such as Firoozeh Dumas or Marjane Satrapi, attempt to lessen critiques against Islam, or recuperate their religious and ethnic identities in some way to counter negative stereotypes forming after 9/11. Khouri, instead, upholds Western views that believe Muslim women are victims. Speaking against the popularity of this view, Jordanian human right's activist Rana Husseini announces in Broinowski's film, "I am really fed up with how we are perceived in the West. You know, we are always perceived as backward,

oppressed people, we don't have a say, our life is being driven by someone else" (Broinowski). Yet, I argue that this view renders *Forbidden Love* as more palatable to Western audiences, since it supports their point of view and way of life, factors both complicit with the hegemonic practices of empire. In fact, *Forbidden Love* "had been voted one of the significant books of all time by Australian readers" (Whitlock 355). The memoir, though a hoax, operates as truth in an Orientalist framework. To those fooled by the text, it was completely believable that a Muslim woman would suffer an honor crime, especially because she was Muslim.

By writing in the genre of memoir, Norma Khouri attempts to legitimate her fictional account of an honor killing by claiming autobiographical authenticity, all the while also garnering the world's attention. Khouri does not stage *Forbidden Love* as a traditional memoir about the self, but as a memoir organized around the supposed slaying of her best friend, masking the reader's understanding about the author. Whether the text reads like a fiction or nonfiction, readers never get to know the real Norma Khouri, since as a memoir, the text talks about Norma's friend in place of herself, and as a hoax, it is not discernable if there is any truth. Instead, the early success of this hoax suggests that contemporary gross misrepresentations and Orientalist depictions of the Middle East are not only accepted, but are also expected. Norma Khouri's hoax, as Souad's, serves as a cultural artifact indicative of a post-9/11 world. These faux memoirs not only record the gullibility of the average Western reader, but they preserve the willingness of some Middle Eastern writers to victimize themselves. Because these narratives have been served up to Western readers in the past, the continuation of Manichean discourses vilifying Middle Eastern societies fulfills expectations engendered by previous writers.

Souad's Brûlée Vive: The Testimonial Hoax

If *Forbidden Love* is virtually unbelievable in its gross exaggerations and misinterpretations, then Souad's *Brûlée Vive* or *Burned Alive* is unreadable, since the faked testimonial is even more simply written and riddled with even more contradictions. As with Khouri's *Forbidden Love*, Souad's *Burned Alive* discusses a victim of an honor crime, though it narrates the journey of a survivor who escapes from the Middle East to Europe, where she records and publishes her harrowing tale. The narrative tells the story of how Souad falls in love with her neighbor and believing that they will marry, consummates the relationship, becoming pregnant. To save her family's honor, her brother-in-law, Hussein, attempts to kill her by burning her. Miraculously surviving the severe burns, she languishes in a West Bank hospital until a European aid worker, Jacqueline Thibault, the *fairy godmother* of this tale, arranges for Souad and her infant son's transport to Switzerland.

Souad's tale is much more sensational and grueling than is Norma Khouri's, since she narrates her own survival of an honor crime, bearing scarred body and all. The text is simply written and reads like a testimonial rather than a memoir, as it focuses on the act of bearing witness, often referring to the protagonist's performance of giving testimony. Not only does it feature Souad's account of her ordeal, but it also includes the narrative of Thibault, the European non-governmental organization (NGO) worker who saved her. The text switches between the first-person perspectives of both women in order to use the genre of testimonial to make a case against the practice of honor killings. Yet, the narrators often contradict themselves, as well as each other, lacking consistency in giving their testimonies. It is not surprising, then, that this honor-killing memoir is considered to be a hoax, as well, since it lacks autobiographical authenticity.

Questions of authorship and motivation for publishing this work becomes a concern, since Souad co-wrote the book with Thibault and was assigned another French co-author, Marie-Therese Cuny, who acts as intermediary, translator, and editor for the publishing house Oh! Editions. Who, then, is the real author of *Burned Alive*? If questions of authenticity surfaced in 2004 about the text's validity, the use of three competing voices to pen the testimonial could have been a major contributing factor. Additionally, though Souad's narrative was originally published in French as *Brûlée Vive* in 2003, it was translated into English in 2004 by Bantam Books' Judith S. Armbruster, entitled as *Burned Alive: A Victim of the Law of Men*. The use of an English translator adds a fourth voice to those of Souad, Thibault, and Cuny, further influencing and complicating Souad's narrative.

Souad's narrative (if we can call it hers) was the first one by a Muslim author to be published by the Parisian publishing house, Oh! Editions. Created in 2002 by Philippe Robinet, Bernard Fixot, and Edith Leblond, Oh! Editions publishes books that the founders deem "close to our hearts with a great hold over our times. Books that denounce and disclose terrible and tragic or beautiful and happy realities of the society we are living in. We have published many testimonies of fighting women" (Oh! Editions online). Following the infamous *Burned Alive* by Souad (2003), Oh! Editions published *Married by Force* by Leila (2004), *Mutilated* by Khady (2005), and *In the Name of Honor* by Mukhtar Mai (2006) (Figures 5–7). The publishing house champions these books as feminist testaments, which supposedly raise consciousness about the obstacles that "Third World" women must face in their daily lives. These memoirs are written with the intention of recounting their assertion of female agency and defiance of patriarchal rule and violence in the Muslim world. But, the texts are almost always one-sided accounts, upholding Euro-American values while condemning Muslim ones.

The peritextual endorsements and subtitles of the testimonial also attempt to secure the text's sense of authority about the honor-killing issue. By May 2005, paperback editions carried the title *Burned Alive: A Survivor of a "Honor Killing" Speaks Out*. Endorsements state, "first true account ever published by a victim of an honor crime," and "the shocking, true story of one woman's escape from an 'honor' killing." On the 2004 Bantam edition, the *Sunday Telegraph* proclaims *Burned Alive* is, "The terrifying memoir of a young Palestinian woman ... Her ordeal reveals the scandalous treatment of women that is the real human rights abuse in the West Bank." Since the book completely upholds Manichean discourses privileging Westerners, it is only fitting that it should bear an endorsement that completely elides the human rights abuses by the Israeli occupation. As the *Telegraph* states, it is the "real" human rights abuse, attempting to replace the fact that Israel had been committing human right's abuses against the Palestinians for decades.

The packaging of Souad's testimonial is manufactured to report on the atrocities from the Middle East. France has its own complicated history with Muslim North Africans and so it is not surprising that Oh! Edition support texts that essentialize Muslim culture as problematic. Though Oh! claims to empower Third World Muslim women through the publication of their life stories, because of the fact that in the narratives they publish a white European savior intervenes and rescues the female protagonist from her own society, the author's agency is displaced. By providing their memoirists with a French interlocutor and by controlling the packaging and production processes of these life narratives, Oh! ensures that the text is congruent to the master narrative of French Empire. Throughout this series of the publishing house's memoirs, the post-9/11 rhetoric is pervasive, as each Muslim woman takes on an issue that is unanimously condemned by Western feminists, such as honor crimes, female genital cutting, and veiling, to

name a few. Furthermore, as these narratives climb the bestseller's charts, they are published in a multitude of translations, which creates a further barrier between audience and the original content of the writer. *Burned Alive* is one such example, where the author and co-authors use the genre of the testimonial to unequivocally condemn Muslim customs, but champion European philosophies.

For a number of reasons, testimonials are rising in fashion among Middle Eastern women writers. Through the facilitation of NGOs and United Nations support, refugees in transit are in a position to culturally transmit their testimonies to global audiences (Whitlock 74). Through this tradition of writing, the teller bears witness to his or her experiences through the acts of remembering and retelling, all the while encoding within the narrative the language of human rights and political activism. Hence, this brings life narratives into wide circulation as transmitters of truth that redeem and uphold human rights values. While this is essential to peacekeeping and aid-providing organizations in the Global North, the push for *authentic*¹⁵ testimonials contributes to a sensationalist attitude toward subaltern stories, pushing them for increased production and distribution (75). Moreover, it brings into question how these statements and stories were prepared, drawing attention to the “Western” framework that manages human rights discourse. These global aid networks elicit testimony, but, as Gillian Whitlock points out, they cannot guarantee the ethical and political conditions in which the story elicits “empathetic witnessing” (77). Because testimonial literature takes the form of a first-person narrative encouraged by an interlocutor, who is often the editor, it is a work of collaboration carefully crafted to fulfill its political agenda.

Yet, as protest literature, testimonials are produced to recuperate personal experience as an agent for change, which passionately rallies for social justice. The arenas of this type of life

writing allow for the subject of self-writing a jurisdiction of truth-telling, that offers the subject control over their own story that may not be the case in court. Jurisdiction, in this case, is a representation of legitimacy that confers a type of status on a person or an act (Gilmore 694). It is for this reason that the form of testimonial literature is appealing to those who wish to bring public attention to individual or collective injuries that they have experienced. While memoir “encompasses both acts of memory and acts of recording personal reminiscences and documentations,” as Nancy K. Miller asserts, testimonials make a political claim that those who witness trauma or violence are authorized truth tellers (Miller 2).

The genre is also attractive because it depends on content, not style. Since many of those giving testimony are illiterate, their testimonial can be easily ghostwritten to mimic the subject’s colloquial speech and, therefore, quickly taken to publication. At its best, testimonials communicate cultural trauma and international conflict and, therefore, possess the ability to more personally allow for the reader’s understanding of cross-cultural conflict. Testimonials can also inspire readers to get involved with a cause and promote activism. Just as in Khouri’s text, Souad provides a call to action for her readers. She includes a supplement at the end of the text with information about the Swiss NGO Surgir, including their contact information. This invocation of the Surgir fulfills the function of a testimonial: to create a narrative around human rights discourse, but it also distracts the reader from pushing to investigate its validity.

The connection between life narratives and humanitarian campaigns has increased in testimonials, since the author embeds modernist language of human rights activism within the text (Whitlock *Soft Weapons* 117). As Gillian Whitlock asserts, “Life narratives promulgate this language as they legitimate personal experience as an agent of change and carry passionate and authentic appeals for social justice and sovereignty across an international civic sphere. This has

driven the memoir boom, shaping cross-cultural engagements in compassionate and empathic terms” (117). If Souad’s narrative is facilitated through Surgir and Oh! Editions, is her life story actually hers, or does the media and publishing industry affect the narrative voice? We can read such a faux testimonial as commodifying the sensationalized life narratives of Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern women.

Lipstick Liberation: Orientalism Masquerading as Western Feminism

In honor killing narratives, there is a physical movement from the Middle East to Europe, which parallels the autobiographical subject’s own figurative journey from peril to salvation. Similar to the *bildungsroman*, wherein the writer seeks self-discovery and truth during a voyage, in the honor-killing memoir, the self is almost always found in the West. The Middle East is usually cast as the uncivilized local that is left behind for a better life in a more civilized Western elsewhere. The mapping of the *Burned Alive* uses this East to West movement, as well as borrows the plot pattern of other honor-killing memoirs, which requires the intervention of a European or American aid worker, or often times a local, but Westernized figure cast as the white Christian savior of the victimized brown Muslim body. The narrative begins recalling the habitual events leading up to the protagonist’s predicament and subsequent honor crime, after which the author narrates the fallout from the honor crime and the facilitation of escape of the victims by a Westernized figure. In Khouri’s text, Michael, the Christian love interest of Dalia, embodies the savior figure, since he had spent time in the West and was civilized, according to Khouri’s view.

In Souad’s testimonial, the inclusion of Thibault’s narratives, which represent her as the white European savior, further reifies the binaries based on the East/West and colonizer/colonized dichotomies. She is given her own sections in the book, where, in the first

person, she narrates her rescue of Souad, thereby complicating the testimonial authenticity of the sole autobiographer. In one of her sections of the text wherein she attempts to corroborate Souad's testimony, Thibault recalls,

I was taking a burned woman and her child to their salvation. One day everyone would know why. They would know, too, that there are others, already dead or dying, in every country where the law of men condones honour crimes—the West Bank, in Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, India, Pakistan, and even in Israel. Yes, even in Europe. They would discover that the rare ones who escape must spend the rest of their lives in hiding because their assassins may still be looking for them. (Souad et al. 221)¹⁶

Between Souad and Thibault's passages, it is clear that the story operates within an Orientalist framework. Thibault rescues her backward Muslim victims and offers them salvation in the epicenter of the European freedom, Switzerland. She assumes honor killings occur all over Muslim nations, expressing reluctance to admit that they also happen in Israel and Europe, cities that are depicted as more civilized places in comparison. However, she attributes the occurrence of honor killings in Europe and Israel to the growing presence of Muslims in those areas; otherwise, according to Thibault, they would not have occurred there.

Thibault is, therefore, the representative of the Western civilizing mission aiming to reform the Muslim native, reminding the reader about the Manichean logic that comprises the narrative. When attempting to explain a Palestinian village's customs, Thibault assumes, "To a Western mind, the idea that parents or a brother can murder their own daughter or sister simply because she has fallen in love is incomprehensible, especially in the twenty-first century. In our society, women are free: they vote, they may have children out of wedlock, they choose their

husbands” (178). By incorporating Thibault’s narrative in the text, the Western perspective is quite literally written into the fabric of *Burned Alive*. Thibault elides the fact that for many Middle Easterners and Muslims, the notion of honor killings is atrocious and condemned by Islam. She assumes that all Muslim men are dangerous and that all Muslim women are in danger, instead posing a Western notion of feminism as the solution to this problem.

The archetype used to set up the binaries in *Burned Alive* seem reminiscent of the central assertions of Gayatri Spivak’s infamous 1970s article, “Can the Subaltern Speak.” Instead of the paradigmatic relationship posed in the article—wherein the brown woman must be saved from the brown man by the white man—in this case, the brown woman, Souad, is saved by a white woman, Thibault (Spivak 94). Souad assumes that all Muslim women cannot assert themselves and are in need of saving, whether it is by white men or white women. This notion is exacerbated by Euro-American feminist rhetoric, represented by Thibault in the text, which aims to create a Muslim women’s liberation movement fashioned on Western notions of emancipation. To the average Western feminist, the veil is considered just as backward and limiting toward Muslim’s women’s agency, as is an honor crime—when in fact, they are two very different issues, requiring their own nuanced discussions. As Thibault notes in the aforementioned passage, “in our society, women are free,” posing Europe as an imagined utopic space, far, far away from the treacherous dystopic Middle East. These discussions about Muslim women’s rights are skewed and become incorporated into a newer paradigm of Orientalism that uses Western feminist language to reframe itself. In testimonial literature, the author, co-authors, and publishing house package and disseminate these views for global consumption, where they have free reign to influence readers.

To evidence this integration of feminist language into Orientalist rhetoric, one must consider the way in which, after the 2001 American military invasion of Afghanistan, American imperialists and venture capitalists rushed in under the guise of rebuilding and creating progressive reforms for women in 2002.¹⁷ For example, the U.S. Lipstick Liberation Campaign backed by fashion and cosmetic moguls Vogue and Revlon sought to liberate women in Afghanistan through the creation of beauty schools in Kabul, which justified Euro–American intercession in Middle Eastern politics. In a radio address, First Lady Laura Bush sought to garner support for the war in Afghanistan by suggesting that the American military and capital intervention via Revlon in the region would liberate Afghani women from the Taliban. Celebrating this notion, she assessed the post-U.S. invasion as a success and commended the advancement of Afghani women, who were emerging from the home to partake in the beauty industry. The then-first lady continued to state, “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (qt. by Lina Abirafeh). In an overly simplistic gesture, Bush equates the West with freedom and the East with imprisonment, particularly in the home space of the *andaruni*.¹⁸ It seems that in order to be free, Afghani women must trade in their burqas for bras and bikinis, to fit contemporary and Westernized models of femininity.¹⁹

In both this historical example, and the case of Souad’s testimonial, Western white feminists strive to teach Third World women about liberation, freedom, and modernity. As a critique of First World feminism, it seems that these political positions are complicit with structures of imperialism than anything else. Third World women have difficulty reconciling their needs with the feminism of First World white women. Third World feminists, therefore,

identify the inability of First World feminists to address issues of race, class, and national positioning as arenas that potentially divide women globally. They reverberate Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's assessments that, conventionally, "global feminism" has come to stand for a "Western" cultural imperialism (Grewal and Kaplan 3). The problem, therefore, lies in the Western approach that is taken to answer the supposed "woman" question in Muslim countries. What better way to mark this phenomenon in the text than to offer the following subtitle to *Burned Alive*, "A Victim of the Laws of Men." The testimonial is introduced by its title: Muslim women are unequivocally the victims of Muslim men.

Faking Bodies: Fabricating the Mutilated Body and the Testimonial Corpus

In addition to the intervention of a Western savior, the use of the body within *Burned Alive* takes on a new significance, as the mutilated body legitimates the corpus of her work. The burned body of the writer becomes evidence, as it must corroborate her story, depicting her survival of the honor crime that meant to *burn her alive*. Seemingly, this would be much harder to fake in a hoax—but since there is no record of the author speaking in public, she is free to present the mutilated body as spectacle within her testimonial. To legitimate her own act of witnessing, Souad offers as many details as she can remember about her honor crime and burning so that the reader can also bear witness through the act of reading her testimony. The author describes a nurse's treatment of her burned flesh; "Under the stream of cold water she pulled off pieces of blackened skin, the shreds of my burned dress, stinking filth. It formed a little pile on the floor of the shower" (Souad et al. 163). In so doing, the reader is able to visualize Souad's blackened body, which stands in for the corpse we are meant to imagine in Khouri's *Forbidden Love*. Unlike Khouri, who avoids reproducing Dalia's corpse in the text, or

producing documentation about her death after the hoax, Souad somewhat describes the mutilated body throughout the text in order to validate her testimony.

Souad's life narrative is indeed a testimonial, since she offers to bear witness in two ways: first, by repeatedly depicting the act of bearing witness to NGOs and acquaintances, and secondly, by recording those acts and describing them again for the reader during the metadiegetic process of writing about her testimony in her testimonial. Invoking Leigh Gilmore's work on the testimonial, jurisdiction can be understood as a representation of legitimacy, which requires the author to make truthful statements about traumatic and political events (Gilmore 5). In this case, the text appeals to humanitarian efforts to curtail violent acts in the Middle East. In *Burned Alive*, the victim is the first-person narrator and the central figure of the text, not the "surrogate narrator," as in *Forbidden Love* (Whitlock 125). Bound up with human rights discourse, the text testifies to the horrific practice of honor killings and urges readers, human rights groups, the U.N., and others to put an end to this practice. Unlike *Forbidden Love*, much of the persuasiveness of the testimonial is bound up with the suffering of the author, as evident in the visual aesthetic of the scarred body.

By crafting a text that performs the native informant's narrative, Souad includes testimony that she authorizes through the images of the scarred and damaged body. There is a quadrilateral relationship between the autobiographical narrator, Souad, her Swiss patron Jacqueline Thibault, her French interlocutor, Marie Therese Cuny, and her Euro-American readers. Yet, in this memoir, the emphasis is placed on the survivor's speech, rather than on the narrative of the survivor's friend (as with Khouri in *Forbidden Love*). When the supporting NGO, Surgir, asks for Souad to bear witness about her experience in her village, the protagonist emerges from the shadows of her new and secret life in Europe to become a leading activist

against honor crimes. To prove that she was in fact a burn victim and honor-crime survivor, Souad reveals her burns to Surgir, to show the physical marks of trauma that haunt the text.

Describing the act of bearing testimony, Souad states:

Jacqueline asked me to bear witness in the name of the Surgir Association. She waited until I was emotionally capable, after the depression that had devastated me ... I was better, but I still felt fragile in front of those European women. I was going to speak to them about a world so different from their own, about cruelty that would be inexplicable to them.

I told my story sitting on a platform before a small table with a microphone. Jacqueline was next to me. From the start, I threw myself into it. And they asked me questions.

“Why did he burn you?”

“What had you done?”

“He set fire to you because you spoke to a man?”

I never said I was expecting a child. I said that if you were only gossiped about in the village, you might end up with the same punishment as someone who was pregnant. I said nothing about my son ...

A woman in the audience got up and asked: “Souad, your face is pretty, where are the scars?”

“I knew you would ask me that question. I expected it. I will show you my scars.”

I got up and in front of everyone, undid my shirt. I was wearing a low-cut blouse and short sleeves underneath. I showed my arms, I showed my back. And

that woman started to cry ... I was dying when Jacqueline arrived in that West Bank hospital. I owe her my life, and the work she pursues with Surgir requires a living witness to demonstrate to other people the reality of the honor crime (Souad et al. 175–6).

Though Souad's face is without scarring, which she attributes to extensive plastic surgery, she apparently possesses burns all over her body. Just like evidence within a trial, Souad undresses and reveals her body to show the remnants of the honor crime carried out against her. It is an act of unveiling that is reciprocal to veiling. When giving her testimony to Surgir, Souad must uncover and expose her body to legitimate her account, but she never fully describes her wounds. When Souad undoes her shirt, she offers the following description, "I showed my arms, I showed my back. And that woman started to cry." She begins with the act of showing, but omits descriptions and jumps to the consequence of the action, the woman's crying. The emotional response is fitting, since it suggests to the reader that they also should be crying and should not be concerned with the lack of evidence of the honor crime. Moreover, Souad's vulnerability here is striking, since she bares all. If the mask on the cover of her memoir suggests concealment, it also hints at the stripping away of masks (or so it would seem). Were this a true testimonial about surviving honor crimes, the reader would be moved to empathize with Souad.²⁰ The acts of bearing witness and giving testimony, therefore, become performative gestures. They allow for the manufacturing of evidence, in place of evidence itself.

Souad recognizes the oppositional relationship between herself and the "European women" for whom she performs and relates her story. Standing beside her in a supportive but authoritative gesture, Thibault asks Souad to bear witness, and in doing so, Souad confirms the primitivism of the Middle East through her testimony and the markings on her body. The female

body comes to represent a people and a nation, just as much as it represents an individual. Yet, the reader is never fully shown the scars of the body, not during the burning itself, the aftermath, or the act of witnessing. Just as with the text's cover, which hides the female figure's face behind a surgical mask, the wounds and evidence of the honor killing are concealed from the reader. This perhaps is intentional, since this narrative is ultimately a hoax.

Even though Souad acts out the revelation of her scars repeatedly throughout the text, the action becomes something of a spectacle of performing the victimized body. Neither Souad nor Thibault provide a description of the scars; rather, they allude to them. Souad mentions that she had twenty-two surgeries for skin grafts taken from her legs and transplanted to her upper body, but the reader isn't offered many more details than that (Souad et al. 235). Rather than provide descriptions of her uncovered mutilated body, Souad emphasizes the covering and masking of it, perhaps emblematic of the text's cover depicting the surgical mask-like face veil. She repeatedly talks about either what she wears to cover the scars, or what she can't wear, since they would reveal the scars. For instance, Souad recalls, "I tried on a mini-skirt, but I couldn't wear it because my legs are scarred when the skin was taken for the grafts. Open neck, short sleeves? I can't wear them because of the scars. Everything I laid out on the bed was 'can't wear it'" (274). She creates tension in this moment for the reader, who is encouraged to sympathize. Again, Souad refers to an aspect of her mutilated body, without revealing the exact details about it. While it could be said that the trauma of the honor crime might prevent her from fully commenting on her scars, because the text is a hoax, the more likely explanation is that her scars don't exist.

Like Khouri, Souad is charged with the task of performing the role of the native informant and speaking for other subaltern women from the West Bank. Souad asserts that

“speaking out” is the “only weapon I have” to act on behalf of Palestinian women (Souad et al. 51). She opens her text, stating, “But to have survived is a miracle. It allows me now to bear witness in the name of all those women who have not had this opportunity and who keep dying for one reason: that they are women” (17). This moment of declaration is not unlike Khouri, who claimed that her sole motivation for publishing was to avenge Dalia’s death and to speak out on Dalia’s behalf. Yet, while Khouri received a formal education, whether it was in the fictional setting of Amman or Chicago (the city wherein she actually grew up), Souad is not educated and comes from a West Bank village. Both Souad and Thibault refer to the author’s illiteracy, as if to justify the intervention of so many co-authors. She must rely upon others to help narrate her story, which is why it takes the form of a straightforward and simply written testimonial. To justify the use of an interlocutor, Thibault writes, “I knew that Souad was illiterate,” which is later supported by Souad’s own desire for literacy, “I wish so much that I had learnt to write” (Souad et al. 193, 263). It would appear that Souad is the subaltern subject who attempts to speak out. To confirm the lie, Souad must portray herself as illiterate, especially if she wants to justify the use of so many co-writers to help her write the text and aid her in giving interviews.

Because Souad censors her own story while giving testimony to Surgir, it suggests that she censors elsewhere in the text, as well. She does not mention that she has a son in her testimony, which seems to be a precursor for the inconsistencies in her text after it was revealed as a hoax. At times, she claims omissions are deliberate, while at other moments she foregrounds textual inconsistencies in a muddled post-traumatic memory. In fact, Souad admits that through psychoanalysis and the use of medication, she is able to work through the trauma of her memories. She talks about having to “reconstruct” or “reassemble the pieces” of her memory, which stand as a preemptive justification for her flawed recollection of events (Souad et al. 51,

105). It seems apropos to invoke a faulty memory throughout her testimonial, since it anticipates inconsistencies with truth.

Acts of Trespassing, Acts of Lying: Hoaxing Testimonial

When considering this text as a hoax, one is reminded of the market's investment in promoting traumatic retellings of the anguished Muslim woman. A study of the paratextual material surrounding the book helps explain its fabrication. As *Burned Alive* gained popularity, university professors, literary critics, and readers found discrepancies that suggested it is a fake. Critics, such as Professor Therese Taylor at Charles State University in Australia, raise unanswered questions about the legitimacy of Souad's story, which range from the medical staff's treatment of her to her inauthentic portrayal of farm work and customs in the West Bank (Taylor, "Truth"). Even more compelling is Souad's inability to consistently retell her story. In various media interviews, both Souad and Thibault fail to tell the same story twice, constantly embellishing and changing their renditions of the past. Though the author claims that her work is based on her recovered memory, which supposedly accounts for the discrepancies of her story, the lack of evidence for the allegations, the faulty geography of the West Bank, the ignorance of the customs of Palestinian women, and the contradictions in chronology all render the work as a hoax.

It seems that the author and the Oh! Editions publishing house capitalized on the global demand for Muslim women's writings. The fabrication of Souad's testimony and its timely publication as part of the booming market for Muslim and Arab life narrative suggest that a politicized manipulation of life story accompanies the American discourse of "the war on terror." Because the legitimacy of the story is based heavily on the authenticity of the author, the text and the author become intertwined as commodities that are packaged for the public. Though readers

become disheartened with such hoaxes, the passing of the lie as truth is fascinating when considering how honor-killing hoaxes operate as truth in an Orientalist sphere.

An exploration of the interview material surrounding *Burned Alive* further helps identify the testimonial as a hoax. In three seminal essays, Therese Taylor records her assertions about *Burned Alive*: the first of which announces the text as a hoax, the second incorporates the publisher's response to her assertions and the third offers a follow-up that records responses to her first two articles on the subject. In the first article of the Taylor trilogy, "Truth, History, and Honor Killing," Taylor locates and records the many inaccuracies in Souad's text. Namely, the geographical location and details about her village are inaccurate; depicting impossibilities in the text. This is not unlike Khouri's text, which incorrectly describes the location and details of Jordan and Jordanian life. Both writers lack a basic understanding and knowledge of the Middle Eastern countries from which they supposedly originate.

Additionally, Souad includes inconsistencies within the text itself about her burns and medical treatment, errors that the editors did not seem to catch. Taylor asserts in her article that the British translation press release claims that Souad had burns to "90 percent of her body and that her son was born three months premature," yet after Taylor wrote Bantam Books in protest about these impossible claims, they reissued a statement admitting that these claims were made in error and that, officially, Souad had "burns to 60 percent of the body" and that her son was born at seven months, not six (Taylor "Truth"). Both versions of the text claim that Souad was able to survive 60–90 percent burns for six weeks in a West Bank hospital, which in 1979 did not have sufficient supplies to sustain or revive someone with those injuries. While the discrepancies are attributed to the act of translating between the French and English translations, they consistently occur within the original French language, as well.

As Taylor points out, the lack of solid evidence in the book is supported or easily dismissed, since Surgir, the charitable backer and savior of Souad, supports the testimony. Yet, when Taylor contacted Surgir—whose director is Jacqueline Thibault, the co-writer of the testimonial—they declined to comment or provide information about their board of trustees (Taylor, “Truth”). This correlates to my earlier discussion about the role of NGOs in the creation of testimonials. The literary aspect of the testimonial is not so important for these organizations, as a narrative, which justifies the mission of the backing organization. Many European and American aid organizations claim to help women and children from developing nations, yet, they seem to operate within a framework that victimizes the women they are aiding. Whether that victimization is real or fabricated, it is critical for organizations to recreate and act out a paradigm where they deliver salvation to the always-oppressed Third World woman.

Additionally, in her second article, “Fabricated: A Tale of Two Memoirs,” Taylor tracks the inconsistencies of the many interviews that Souad gives to European presses. Souad embellishes facts; for instance, she increases the number of female children her mother intentionally killed after giving birth, in what she claims is a typical act of infanticide in the West Bank. In a 2001 *Elle* magazine interview, two years prior to her book, Souad claimed that her mother “gave birth to a baby girl and smothered it,” which changed to two newborn babies in an *ANSA* interview. In the text itself, Souad states, “I’m not sure I was present for the third one, but I knew about it.” Taylor asserts that by January 2004, in a German television interview, it was noted that, “Laconically, she tells how she saw her mother kill four or five of their sisters, immediately after the birth.” Later, by April, Souad had claimed in *De Groene Amsterdammer* that she saw her mother “suffocate seven of my little sisters. Seven!” (qtd. in Taylor,

“Fabricated”). The tale, which keeps getting taller, is but one example of Souad’s embellishments, which inaccurately portray Palestinian culture as brutal and barbaric.

The interviews are compelling as a tool of measurement for Souad’s embellishments. Before the texts’ publication, *Elle* published an article that read, “Tortured for speaking to a boy!” which had dramatically changed by the publication of *Burned Alive*, which depicts the burning of an abandoned pregnant girl. It has not helped that, when questioned about discrepancies in her text, Souad remains silent and avoids answering. At a press conference in Europe, Christelle Méplon of *De Standaard* reported, “for security considerations, no interviews will be permitted to persons of Arab ethnicity” (Taylor “Truth”). Is this to avoid Souad’s identification for her own safety, or is to refuse any opportunity for Souad to be disproved?

In her final article to date about *Burned Alive*, “Burning Questions: Review Debunks Honor-Crime Memoir,” in order to further discredit the book, Taylor presents new information she has learned from other readers, critics, and Palestinian locals since publishing her first two articles. In the latest interviews Taylor collected, the autobiographical subject claims that she no longer knows Arabic, and that “I am no longer an Arab, I am a European woman ... I no longer speak Arabic.” When questioned further by the interviewer of *Die Weltwoche*, Souad claimed that she was unable to translate a single word of Arabic (Taylor “Burning”). Souad’s transformation to a European woman anchors her self-discovery in this testimonial, which mirrors movements: from East to West, from mutilated to whole, and from uncivilized to civilized.

The most interesting of Taylor’s assertions is that Souad’s refusal of the word “Palestinian” suggests that it is written from a conservative, “far-right wing” Israeli perspective (Taylor “Truth”). In *Burned Alive*, Souad describes Palestinians as “the people of the West

Bank” and “Arabs,” never once calling them Palestinian. Though Taylor touches only briefly on this notion, I believe it is the cornerstone of Souad’s work. Considering this notion, the text’s logic begins to make sense. From an Israeli perspective, the Palestinians are lawless, violent, backward, and brutal, which, of course, is because they are Muslim. By creating a text that denounces Palestinians every step of the way throughout the book, Souad creates the ideal weapon in the latest struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. The international recognition and accolades that were awarded to the book since its publication justify the Israeli struggle against the Palestinians. Indeed, the aforementioned *Sunday Telegraph* review resurfaces here as it describes honor crimes as the “real human rights abuse in the West Bank.” As an added benefit of the hoax, *Burned Alive* is, therefore, nothing more than a long-winded, fabricated piece of propaganda serving Israeli Zionist discourse. At the same time, it supports American imperialist rhetoric of “the war on terror,” since *Burned Alive* demonizes Muslims throughout, justifying any kind of imperial intervention seeking to order the unruly Muslim world.

The *Washington Post Book World* positively reviewed *Burned Alive*, proclaiming, “Her tale is so shocking that it has to be told plainly; this is not a literary effort so much as it is a rare artifact . . . nothing less than a miracle” (qtd. in Taylor “Truth”). Indeed, the hoax is an artifact, but not the one Souad intended. Rather, it is a record of the gullibility of a post-9/11 age, where European nations, the United States, and Israel benefit from the image of the violent and downtrodden Muslim. While in testimonial speech the act of speaking empowers the autobiographical narrator, when the testimonial is a hoax, the confessional tests the limits of truth. The witness often inflates her own importance of standing up for silenced others (Gilmore *Soft Weapons* 5). The simplicity of the tale seemingly confirms the stereotype that a villager from the West Bank can only rely on memory and orality to serve her. If Khouri’s selling of the

lie depends on her education in America to create a text that corresponds to American imperialism, then Souad's hoax depends on her illiteracy to excuse the many errors and inconsistencies in the faked testimonial. Furthermore, the discrepancies in her testimonial do not seem to bother her audience, since she has found refuge elsewhere, as she signs underneath her name in the closing,

Thank you,
Souad,
Somewhere in Europe (Souad et al. 334)

It has been impressed upon the reader that for reasons of security, Souad's anonymity is necessary. This ambiguity further corresponds to the text's logic, which equates movement to the West with freedom. It is not so important that we know where Souad lives, as long as she is in Europe. Clearly then, Souad is the subaltern peasant, whom without the help of a European aid worker would never have been able to deliver her shocking tale to international aid organizations, world audiences, literary prize-giving boards, and journalistic accolades.

The Final Verdict

Let me propose that if either Norma Khouri or Souad had announced that their texts were intentional hoaxes after reigning atop bestselling charts, they would have been interesting case studies for pointing out negative cultural attitudes against Muslims. Either author would have created the perfect moment to expose irrational hostilities and stereotypes lodged at Middle Easterners after 9/11. Instead, however, both Khouri and Souad's hoaxes manufacture and recycle stereotypes of Muslims and Middle Easterners. Their texts were timely during the widespread Islamophobia spreading throughout the Global North, especially because they cater to popular misperceptions about Muslims. As cultural artifacts of a post-9/11 era, these hoaxes

record how lies were told and how political conditions were right for global audiences to buy them.

For these hoaxes to pass undetected, there are three necessary requirements in a formula for their success, requiring the tacit cooperation of the author, the market, and the reader. It is true that the market pushes Middle Eastern women writers into the “ethnic” and “Third World” categories, and encourages these writers to perform as seemingly victimized Muslim women. While publishing houses are complicit in readily publishing these hoaxes without much research to their validity, the authors themselves are also ready to exaggerate and embellish for, most likely, fame, international prestige, and wealth. The two parts of the formula are required: a Muslim woman writer is prepared to victimize herself, and publishers are anxious to meet the market’s demands and disseminate her account of the Middle East. Lastly, Euro–American audiences complete the formula, since it is for them that the authors are writing. Especially after 9/11, when these narratives flooded the market, they seemingly confirmed fears that the Middle East is a medieval and treacherous place, breeding terrorists to disrupt world order. It is not so important that the authors lied, but that most readers unquestioningly bought the lie since these types of sensationalist narratives were initially more popular than counter-narratives.

In response to hoaxes and sensationalist memoirs like *Forbidden Love* and *Burned Alive*, Middle Eastern writers like Firoozeh Dumas, Marjane Satrapi, Mohja Kahf and Rabih Alameddine, resist Orientalizing Middle Eastern culture. For instance, Iranian American writer Firoozeh Dumas similarly works with Orientalist tropes, but ones that exoticize the Orientalized woman as an object of desire. In so doing, Dumas reverses the reader’s expectations by replacing them with an objectification of the Western woman as the one to be desired. Yet, in the process, she also validates the popular perception that to gain social standing in America, an immigrant

must mimic white Americans. Likewise, Iranian French writer Marjane Satrapi uses the comic book style to visually disrupt the stereotypical image that all Iranian women are veiled in a black chador. She humanizes Iranians, showing them in settings and situations they could take place in Europe and America. She resists Orientalizing Iranian culture, instead exoticizing Europe as the perceived locality of utopic societies. After 9/11, writers like Dumas and Satrapi have become important for discussions, which investigate alternative narratives and life stories responding to neo-Orientalist testimonials. As counter-narratives, their memoirs humanize the Iranian subject, while using humor to create an innovative language to discuss a liminal existence in exile.

¹ The Muslim call to prayer, which begins with *Allahu Akbar, Ashhad an la ilaha illa ilah*, “God is great, there is no deity except for God.” This is the single-most reproduced auditory marker for the Middle East in American news, film, and television.

² I define the region of the Middle East to include the following countries: Turkey, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi, UAE, Yemen, Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Cypress, and Egypt. My dissertation focuses on those emigrating from Jordan, Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. I do not mean to conflate Middle Easterner with Arab, Iranian, or Muslim, but rather, my use of the word shows the tension between the nuances and cultural differences between each community and their common depiction as a Pan-Middle Eastern identity in narratives published in the United States and Europe.

³ I am referencing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s infamous work, *Empire* (2000), which identifies the idea that as the world continues to globalize, empire spreads to include individuals outside of the realm of empire.

⁴ My operational definition of an honor killing is femicide that is justified by the preservation of male-defined honor. That is, it is the killings of girls or women accused of sexual transgression in order to cleanse family honor.

⁵ Dabashi’s article for *Al-Ahram Weekly*, entitled, “Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire,” offers a salient critique of Azar Nafisi’s role in representing the view of American neo-conservatives in her first memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In her text, Nafisi vilifies Iran and essentializes it as “other” to fit the American paradigmatic structure for imperial advancement. Dabashi, *Al-Ahram Weekly*. June 2006.

⁶ This is in reference to Cassanova's center/periphery model, which shows the politics of publishing within a colonial/postcolonial framework.

⁷ The testimonial, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, makes for an interesting case study for comparison to the genre of Middle Eastern women's memoirs. Menchu's 1982 work retells her involvement with the Guatemalan Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP). Though she was not the first guerrilla fighter to narrate her testimony as part of this genre (her *testimonio* was modeled after Che Guevara's *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*), she was one of the first women to write within the male-dominated genre, inserting her female voice as *machista*. Because Menchu's testimony speaks from her perspective as an indigenous Guatemalan fighter in the Civil War, critics initially celebrated her as a subaltern writer. Yet, because she changed a lot of facts and dates in her text, critics denounced her testimonial as a hoax. If Menchu's work is indeed a fabrication or embellishment of the truth, one must then ask: how are we to read her *testimonio*, as well as alter our perceptions or expectations of testimonial works? Latin American critic Elzbieta Sklodowska probes further to ask: is *testimonio* an "authentic" subaltern voice, or a "mediated" narrative in which there is a staging of the ethnic as "other"? For that matter, referring back to Spivak, can there even be an authentic subaltern voice? I am critical of using the notion of authenticity as a guideline for women's self-writing, because it is a limiting and monolithic notion of cultural expression. Because Menchu narrated her story to Elisabeth Burgos in Paris, the representative of the publishing company in France, the very question of speaking becomes a central issue. John Beverley aptly questions, in his collection of critical essays entitled *Testimonio: who is the author of I, Rigoberta Menchu*; who is the compiler or narrator? In reviewing the debates surrounding *testimonio* literature in Latin America, the issue that emerges as relevant to this study questions how to read testimonial works. Are they considered literature, life history, or cultural history?

⁸ Additionally, in 2011, it was uncovered that the blog and persona belonging to Amina Abdallah Arraf al Omari, a lesbian Syrian American blogger writing during the Arab Spring, was fabricated. The weblog, *A Gay Girl in Damascus*, was actually created by a straight, American man, Tom MacMaster, who posed as a gay, Syrian woman writing against the government. In order to legitimate his critiques about Middle Eastern culture and politics, MacMaster actively blogged under this fictitious Middle Eastern identity until he disappeared Amina with a fabricated abduction. Inciting outrage from bloggers and denouncements from the American State Department, the Syrian Government, and the British Government, MacMaster finally admitted to creating the character and quit blogging as Amina (*BBC*). In an interview with NPR, MacMaster said that he felt that if he had used his real name, his American identity would prevent others from recognizing the legitimacy of his critiques (NPR). According to MacMaster, he created his character to represent those fighting in Syria (*CNN*). As in the case of so many hoaxes, it is important to ask why the public believed him. MacMaster's creation is a testament to readers wanting to believe in a social media heroine of the Arab Spring. Since the 2003 memoir boom, the public no longer demands to read the narrative of the victimized Muslim woman. Rather, in light of the Arab Spring, narratives depicting women who fight Muslim theocracies and Middle Eastern dictatorships are more in-demand. MacMaster's hoax suggests that if the "right" kind of Middle Eastern native informant's narrative cannot be found, then it could be fabricated from elsewhere.

⁹ Considering Gerard Genette's discussion of paratexts in his seminal work, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, the packaging of a text plays an important role in shaping the reception of an author's work. Paratexts are made up of peritexts, which are those elements "inside" the text, such as dedications, endorsements, and book covers, while epitexts are materials "outside" the bound volume that include interviews, criticisms, public appearances, and personal circumstances surrounding a writer and their work (Genette 8).

¹⁰ Though neither an honor-killing memoir, nor a hoax, Azar Nafisi's memoir also participates in the neo-Orientalist movement. The cover of her memoir depicts two veiled women, whose eyes and heads are lowered to suggest that they are downcast or simply reading a forbidden book in Iran. As Hamid Dabashi points out in his *Al-Ahram Weekly* article, the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was appropriated from an entirely different context: it was taken from news reports during the parliamentary election of February 2000 in Iran (Dabashi "Native Informers"). In the original picture, the two young women are, in fact, reading the leading reformist newspaper *Mosharekat*. The image was cropped, creating the illusion that they are abject and "Reading Lolita," while the scarves of the two teenagers visualize the location, "in Tehran." Nafisi and her editor cut out the setting of the college campus, the reading of the newspaper, and the picture of President Khatami, who was at that time the symbol of the Reformist moment, thereby erasing their political agency.

¹¹ Found on the European and U.S. editions of *Burned Alive*.

¹² The use of film theory here is only a means to mobilize a close reading of the veiled image.

¹³ In Shiraz's *The Veil Unveiled*, the author surveys the history of American representation of Middle Easterners through advertisements, magazine articles, and *Playboy* sketches. The *Playboy* sketches are most demonstrative of the exoticization of Muslim women, as the images depict naked women, who are wearing only headscarves while engaging in sexual acts.

¹⁴ Khouri peppers her text with numerous Arabic phrases, as if to authenticate it her subjectivity as an Arab woman.

¹⁵ Or what the public perceives as authentic. Authenticity is insisted upon to the extent of a theatrical cultural performance.

¹⁶ Instead of citing *Burned Alive* as solely Souad's text, I will use the citation: "Souad et al." as a reminder of the text's many authors: Souad, Jacqueline Thibault, and Marie-Thérèse Cuny. I do occasionally refer to *Burned Alive* as "Souad's text" as a shorthand means of identifying the work. Nevertheless, the use of multiple authors discredits the notion of autobiographical authenticity in the case of *Burned Alive*.

¹⁷ This process would be again repeated in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003.

¹⁸ Persian word denoting the architectural space designed for the women's quarters. While this space is popular in traditional Afghan homes, it does not mean it is isolating or an imprisonment, rather affords a private space for women. Whether one wishes to argue for or against the implementation of the *andaruni*, a longer and informed discussion is required. While under the Taliban (who were originally backed by the United States against the Soviets), women did lose rights that they had prior to Taliban rule of Afghanistan, Bush ignores the history of women's rights in Afghanistan, especially before Taliban rule. She inaccurately presents the issue in black and white terms, assuming that there were no rights prior to American intervention.

¹⁹ It is an unveiling not dissimilar to what Frantz Fanon discusses about French-occupied Algeria in the 1950s in his article "Unveiling Algeria." The focus on women and the use of feminist discourse is just an apparatus for state control by the colonizer.

²⁰ Were this a true honor crimes memoir, one could make conjectures as to how this relates to Kristeva's work on the abject, or consider performance of the deformed body in disability studies or performance about the theatricals. Souad is shown to be vulnerable in front of her European audience and objectified as she strips for them. Rather than an object of pleasure, the body is gazed at in horror at its disfigurement. The marks of the body authenticate the staging of the text as the "true story" of an honor-killing survivor. Yet, I am choosing not to validate the narrative with a close reading that takes the issues at face value.

Chapter Two

Comedic Masks, Tragic Faces: Humor, Racial Passing, and Identity Fragmentation in the Memoirs of Firoozeh Dumas and Marjane Satrapi

In Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*, the memoirist-cum-protagonist states, "In America, I have an 'ethnic' face, a certain immigrant look that says, 'I'm not Scandinavian'" (Dumas *Funny* 37). She continues to remark, "People see me and think of hostages. This is why, in my next life, I am applying to come back as a Swede ... Should God get things confused and send me back as a Swede trapped in the body of a Middle Eastern woman, I'll just pretend I'm French" (41). In her memoir, the author uses humor to underscore her ethnic difference from White Americans and the prejudice that she repeatedly encounters. She also signals a genre prevalent in many forms of ethnic-American literature—the Passing Narrative—which has historically discussed the notion of assuming another race, religion, class, or gender to align with a more privileged identity. In this example, Dumas points to issues of racial passing, since "ethnic" and "brown" have become pejorative words in America following the 1980s hostage crisis (41). Mockingly, Dumas points out the absurdity of racism toward Iranians in the 1980s and its resurgence after 9/11; yet, instead of dismissing it completely, she copes through assimilative attitude. She presents the challenges of post-9/11 *de facto* discrimination for Iranians in America and offers racial passing as a potential and equally problematic solution for thwarting racism against Iranians. Although she is critical of strained Iranian/American relations, she often unabashedly ridicules her out-of-place family and the culture clashes resulting from her family's move from Iran to the United States in 1972.

Looking at Orientalist tropes, Dumas flips the script and the reader's expectations, which exoticize the Easterner as the desirable "other," replacing this notion with one that objectifies the

Westerner as the one to be desired. Yet, in so doing, she also validates the popular perception that to gain social standing in America, an immigrant must mimic a White American.

Regardless, Dumas's troubled portrayal of passing confirms the difficulty of simultaneously developing Iranian and American identities before and after the 1979 Revolution. She uses humor in both of her memoirs to contend with an Iranian identity that unquestioningly strives to assimilate into American culture, while paradoxically clutching to the ends of her Persian roots.

Though the author is reductive, overly simplistic, and uncritical at times in her writing, her use of humor remains of critical importance for understanding Iranian American identity formation in literature. While I critique the formal structure of her writing, Dumas's memoir is one of the few written by an Iranian woman that compares life for Iranians in America before and after the 1979 Iranian/Islamic Revolution. I, therefore, wish to recuperate her work as a nuanced cultural artifact testifying to the difficulty of assimilating into American culture and developing a unified identity in the process.

Additionally, writer Marjane Satrapi, who moved from Iran to Vienna in 1983, back to Iran in 1989, and finally to Paris in 1994, also uses humor to work through her displacement in post-revolutionary Iran and Vienna. In contrast to Dumas, however, Satrapi uses a very different vehicle to transport her humor. To communicate her life story, she embraced a new genre, the graphic memoir, which has become popular with writers from social margins, first with Jewish American cartoonist Art Spiegelman, and more recently with lesbian writer Alison Bechdel and Chinese American cartoonist Gene Luen Yang. Using comic book illustrations to frame her popular *Persepolis* series, Satrapi recounts the horrors of the 1979 Revolution, the hypocrisy of its aftermath, and the difficulties of acclimating to a hostile Europe. In one frame recalling a party she attended in Vienna, a French student Francofies her first name "Marjane" into "Marie-

Jeanne” and asks her about her ethnic origins. In response, Marjane lies and proclaims, “I’m French” in an unconvincing attempt to pass for someone other than Iranian. In the next frame,



(Satrapi *Persepolis* 2 41)

she explains to the audience, “I should say at that time, Iran was the epitome of evil and being Iranian was a heavy burden to bear. It

was easier to lie than bear that burden” (*Persepolis* 2 41). As does Dumas, Satrapi presents racial passing as an alternative to being perceived as one of those supposedly dangerous Iranians.

While, at times, the use of humor is not as obvious in Satrapi’s memoirs as it is in Dumas’s, her use of caricatures and sketches undermines the formality of a traditional memoir and boosts the sarcastic and ironic tones of the text. Her use of irony, in particular, draws from the age-old tradition of comedy in creating laughter by pairing incongruous text and imagery. In the frame, Marjane is dressed in punk fashion, sporting a short and spiky haircut, resembling a French punk girl rebelling against the Establishment. It is not so unbelievable to Western readers, since she is living in Europe, but what they neglect to realize is that some Iranians had already been invoking Western fashion, including punk, in 1980s Iran. What is most significant about this image, however, is that it visually disrupts the stereotypical image that all Iranian women are veiled in a black chador, which has been imprinted in the collective memory of the West. As it becomes clear throughout *Persepolis*, Satrapi is careful to dispel Orientalist tropes that classify Iranians as a singular and static group. She presents the reader with numerous examples of individuals who visually disrupt this narrative.

When comparing both Dumas and Satrapi's approach to expressing their Iranian identity in 1980s Euro-American societies, it seems that initially both authors don French masks in order to dodge a troubling Iranian identity. Perhaps they falsely claim a French identity because there had been a longstanding French influence in pre-revolutionary Iran, and because it is one of the many ethnicities for which some Persians can pass.¹ Though Firoozeh² in *Funny in Farsi* is not initially critical of passing when she is a child, as an adult, she eventually understands that it is a confusing and problematic solution. For Dumas, this process seems to span years, and chapters within her memoir, whereas for Satrapi, its representation is much shorter. Within just a few frames, indicating the passage of just a day, the young adult Marjane realizes that passing for French is not a viable option, since she has always attempted to be authentic to herself and to her family. Passing, though treated differently in each text, is just one theme running in both these memoirs to express the difficulty of race relations between Iranians and Euro-Americans after 1979.

Equally compelling is Dumas and Satrapi's use of humor in the genre of memoir to communicate life experiences. The inclusion of humor allows both authors to confront Euro-American hostility during the era of the hostage crisis (and resurgence again after 9/11), and to make sense of their precarious positions in American and Viennese society, respectively, from the changing perspective of a child turned adult. They strategize humor to confront their pasts, not uncommon for writers working through traumatic moments, such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its aftermath. Additionally, the use of humor allows each memoirist to not only express difficult moments from their lives, but it also enables them to reach out to Iranian and Euro-American audiences to contribute their "herstories" about contemporary Iranian politics (which had mostly been discussed by male writers and historians).

By using humor to enhance their memoirs, both authors are able to write around censoring audiences: whether they are men, revolutionaries, conservatives, or officials (such as the Iranian censorship committee in the case of the Persian translation of Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*). They use humor to add to the elasticity of self-disclosure and concealment in autobiographical writing. In the field of life writing, it is known that the female subject cannot help but be aware of her censoring audiences. For instance, in her study of women's diaries, Deborah Martinson found that men expected diary "privileges" in reading, judging, controlling, and censoring what was written about themselves and their spouses (Martinson 1). Whereas men often wrote diaries for publishing within the public sphere, women historically wrote them from the personal, and their diaries were not published until after their deaths, if ever (3).³ Through comedic parody and mocking, women are able to take a serious issue or point of contention and question its validity by creating laughter about it.⁴

The comedic retelling of one's past experiences allows for a blurring of fact and fiction through the author's subjective and humorous perspective, pushing the genre of memoir further into the realm of creative autobiography. Suzanne Reichl and Mark Stein suggest in *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial* that one must trace comedic roots back to Greek antiquity and Plato's *Republic* to discern laughter's effect on the person and society in which comedy is employed (10). Just as the mask of comedy was worn as a secondary face to denote happiness and laughter, perhaps the comedic mask used in ancient Greek theater is an appropriate metaphor for the use of humor employed in contemporary Third World women's memoirs. Historically, on the stage, masks not only served as disguises, but as second faces that evoked the shift in the mood onstage.

Similarly, I argue that many Third World women writers don figurative masks within their writing, in order to control what they emote. If one considers historian Oliver Taplin's assertions that in the ancient world, Greek actors traditionally masked themselves to prevent being assaulted by their political audience members, then today it seems that these self-preserving metaphorical masks work to guard against self-disclosure in Iranian women's life writing (Taplin 284). That is to say, that while humor broadens the scope of narrative retelling in memoir, it can doubly serve as a device for preservation and concealment of the writer's identity. For Iranian women writers, humor can serve as a self-saving mask should they wish to avoid overtly critiquing or disclosing aspects of the political or personal.

When confronting the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the resulting Islamic Republic, this notion of masking can resurface as Iranian women writers pick and choose what they want to reveal. For some writers, this can lead to self-censorship so that bridges aren't burned with Iran; for others, there might be a political revelation of sorts but a concealment of one's own past transgression to save face. Memoirists such as Firoozeh Dumas and Marjane Satrapi can accomplish just the same in comedic life writing, using humor to add to the elasticity of self-disclosure and concealment in autobiographical writing. The process of writing the self within memoir already vacillates between the poles of impulses that simultaneously want to "give and hide" the self (Martinson 10). It is not surprising, therefore, to see humor enhance that oscillation between the acts of bearing all and preserving a private self. Invoking the double masks of the Greek tragic-comic model as a metaphor, I argue that Dumas and Satrapi's flippant humor is a means to present the Iranian "other," especially women, as funny, nonthreatening, and, therefore, in the best possible light to Western readers. Because humor can simultaneously allow for comedic disclosure as well as maintain the concealment of particular aspects of one's personal

history, views, and beliefs, it is the mask that the writer dons in order to fashion a narrative that performs the native informant's role as cultural go-between and mediator.

Ultimately, Iranian women memoirists such as Dumas and Satrapi are able to use humor in productive ways either to point out the tension between clashing cultural groups and raise consciousness about gender issues (without necessarily having to provide solutions for them), or they can use comedy and parody to reject established socio-political beliefs and hegemonies. In Dumas's case, the author wears the face of a well-assimilated Iranian American and avoids creating confrontation in her text (with either American or Iranian political systems). She has preserved ties with both countries, allowing for movement back and forth between. She uses the vehicle of humor in tandem with the notion of passing to potentially quell racial hostility and resolve issues of identity fragmentation.⁵ While the author seemingly advocates ethnic passing as an alternative to bearing the burden of being Iranian in America, she later problematizes this notion at the conclusion of her memoir, pointing out the complexities of assimilation for Iranians in the United States during the 1980s.

Satrapi, on the other hand, is more critical throughout her text, using sarcasm heavily throughout to critique the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution and the ensuing Islamic regime. For her, there is no going back. Her book is banned in Iran (though available in numerous translations, including Persian, on the Black Market) and she most certainly cannot return for writing a work that is critical of the regime.⁶ Satrapi takes more risks in her work by focusing it on a critique of not just Iranian society, but also on the European societies in which she has lived. Like Dumas, she points out issues with identity conflicts, instead resolving them with reclamation of her many identities (whether Iranian, Muslim, Marxist, etc.), rather than advocate racial passing or assimilative attitudes for Iranians in the West.

***Theorizing Funny, Brown Women Writers:
Discourses on Humor, Race, Gender, and the Self***

In the publication of Middle Eastern women's memoirs, some texts are productive (in the fight against racial and religious stereotyping), by allowing for potential therapeutic disclosure, while others are unproductive, by creating propaganda that portrays all Muslims as backwards. The Neo-Orientalist revival in Middle Eastern women's memoirs, such as *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri, *Burned Alive* by Souad, and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, are just a few recent examples that fully ascribe to Orientalist views that demonize Muslims in the process. Bishnupriya Ghosh argues, "In a post-colonial era, certain narratives and acts of signification—'the free world,' 'third world women' as victims, 'regressive Muslim fundamentalists' who pose a challenge to democracy—exist as epistemological effects of the colonial past ... [and] are dislocated and used as 'scripts'" to explain contemporary crises apart from imperial practices that make up contemporary politics (Ghosh 41-2). It is not surprising that there is a demand for Middle Eastern women's life stories to justify, in part, the global shift toward Islamophobia⁷ since 9/11. If the objective of Middle Eastern women's autobiographical writing is to simultaneously inform and entertain, then the inclusion of humor (to make for a funny memoir) seems a natural evolution of the genre. On one hand, these memoirs are written to allow for Third World women to disseminate their stories and educate the masses about the quotidian life in their home countries. On the other, they are often published and marketed to read as a scripted justification for Western imperialism and militaristic intervention.

For many Iranian writers in Euro–American diasporic communities, it is the former, as they are anxious to break through reductive stereotypes that characterize Middle Eastern women as silent, backward, and traditional. In penning their autobiographical narratives after 9/11, Iranian women recall their past to change the contemporary revival of hostility against Iranians.

They use many narrative devices, such as humor, to counteract the stereotypical perception that all Middle Eastern and Muslim women veil their bodies, their lives, and their words.⁸ By creating laughter about the self, Iranian women memoirists such as Dumas and Satrapi can use humor to contend with the fact that they are writing from under a double bind, wherein they can be potentially discriminated against in terms of ethnicity and gender. Considering Helene Cixous assertions, a woman's laughter can "break up the truth" by unsettling accepted ideas (Reichl and Stein 10). In Dumas's case, laughter breaks through the stereotyped silent spaces associated with Muslim women. Humor allows for a duality that can both please the reader and conceal the secrets of the writer.

By comparing Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi* with Marjane Satrapi's four-part *Persepolis* series, I will engage each author's use of humor as a narrative technique to facilitate the retelling of their experiences in leaving Iran and living abroad during heightened tension between Iran and the West. More specifically, I will evaluate how they employ humor to cope with their liminality between Iran and the Euro–American countries they inhabit. By using humor, these two writers not only enhance the conventional form of autobiography, but they also invoke the art of storytelling and satire, known respectively in Persian as *ghesseh goftan* and *tanz*.⁹ By invoking humor, both Iranian immigrant writers are able to complicate engendered and racialized discourses, while mocking what is presumably sacred. In so doing, they are able to create personal, political, and social transformations with the aid of mockery and sarcasm. Their memoirs are just as much a commentary on the reception of Iranians today as in 1979.

The difference between the two writers and their texts, however, lies in how they use humor: Dumas uses it to mask or cover-up potential problems with American assimilation, whereas Satrapi uses humor to critique the lost socialist revolution of 1979, post-revolutionary

Iranian society and her disappointing immigration to Vienna. Dumas mostly uses humor as a form of self-conscious apology for being too ethnic, but sometimes, the authors intersect in using humor to ridicule the monolithic views about Iranians. Dumas borrows from the American tradition of humor, using self-deprecating jokes that could not possibly be funny in Persian. Her audience, as with Satrapi, is a Western one, and it is for them that they are both writing their memoirs. Yet, where Satrapi is critical about European culture and points out its shortcomings, Dumas idealizes American society, at the expense of feeling embarrassment about her Iranian ethnic identity. She is often mindful, if not shameful, about her own foreignness, which she gauges through a comparison to American values. She often dons the role of the model immigrant and, in doing so, validates European and American narratives that demand émigrés to assimilate,¹⁰ whether or not they are displaced due to military invasion, civil war, linguistic barriers, economic hardship, and/or mental trauma. While both authors consciously don the role of the “native informant” and mediate between Iran and their respective Euro–American countries of adoption, Satrapi is much more careful to present a complex and truthful account of Iran and its politics.

Firoozeh: Farsi’s Funny Femme?

In her memoirs, Firoozeh Dumas uses humor to contend with her discomfort with an Iranian upbringing and her new American surroundings when her family moves to Orange County, California, prior to the 1979 Revolution and its ensuing national crisis. She often uses self-deprecating jokes and mocks her family with a comedic style fueled by American humor. The structure of humor that Dumas employs easily fits into an American worldview, as it does not invoke a Persian style of humor (which always strives to “save the face” of the joke teller and preserve their honor at the expense of others). She crafts a self-conscious mocking text that often

laughs at Iranian ignorance about American values and customs. She offers comic relief for the tension between Iranians and Americans during the 1980s, as well as pokes fun at the struggles associated with immigrating. For this reason, her memoir could resonate with other ethnic Americans who share her experiences, contributing to the genre of ethnic American humor.¹¹ Written in English, her memoir is directed toward all Americans, including new Americans, and other Anglophone readers.

Both of her memoirs, *Funny in Farsi* (2003) and *Laughing Without an Accent* (2008), complicate the traditional form of a memoir, containing as they do chapters composed of short vignettes that use humor to deny American racism against Iranians, while simultaneously mocking aspects of Iranian customs, particularly as they come into contact with American traditions. For the scope of this study, I will limit my discussion of Dumas's use of humor primarily to her first memoir, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. In her memoir, Dumas invokes the archetypal role of Scheherazade to deliver her stories in a fluid, anachronistic work. This rupture of time allows for Dumas to manipulate the confines of a straightforward retelling of her past, pushing the work into the realm of creative nonfiction. The author weaves experiences of her family's and her immigration to the United States before 1979 with tales about her adaptation to American culture. Because each chapter focuses on one story designed to evoke laughter and educate the reader about what it feels like to be an Iranian American, the narrative structure resembles *A Thousand and One Nights*, as the author must keep her American audiences entertained to gain popularity. Just as Scheherazade thwarts King Shahryar's threats to end her life, Dumas avoids an impending doom (the threat of racism and prejudice against Iranians). Ultimately, she creates morality tales throughout her book designed

to foster empathy within the reader for the plight of the ostracized Iranian in America. She uses humor to not only entertain the reader, but to gain their sympathy with the turn of every page.

In order to deliver a more Americanized self image, Dumas employs a sarcastic and self-deprecating style of humor more consistent with American comedy than with Persian joking. She uses cultural forms of humor as another way of masking her identity. *Funny in Farsi* was a bestseller for months and, as a testament to its popularity, it was piloted as a “Persian Cosby Show” for ABC and an “anti-*Not Without My Daughter*” according to Maz Jobrani, who stars as Kaz (Dumas’s father), along with Marjan Neshat as Nancy (Dumas’s mother), Hratch Titizian as Uncle Mo, Kendra Jain as Firoozeh, and David Gore as Farshid (Dumas’s brother) (“Funny in Farsi on ABC”). Though ABC did not pick up the show for a season, its mere creation speaks to the way in which humor is potentially appealing to use as a vehicle for discussions about difficult issues, such as immigration, racism, assimilation, and the like.

Following the success of *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas had her first memoir translated in Persian as *Atr-i Sunbol, Atr-i Kāj (The Scent of Hyacinths, the Scent of Pine)*, which became a bestseller in Iran after being published by Ghesseh Publishers in 2005. Because she avoids making overt political critiques, Dumas has been able to publish in Iran, with the caveat that she removes chapters violating *Shari’a* law, namely her father’s penchant for ham and gambling. She followed her first memoir and its Persian translation with the publication of her second memoir, *Laughing Without an Accent* in 2008. In the opening of this memoir, she recounts the laborious nature of translation work between her and her translator, Mohammad Soleimani Nia, and the problematic run-ins with the censorship bureau of Iran. The difficulty with translating *Funny in Farsi*, as Dumas concedes, is, “Humor, like poetry, is culture specific and does not always work in translation. What’s downright hilarious in one culture may draw blank stares in another”

(Dumas, *Laughing* 4). Indeed, Dumas speaks to the politics of translation, not just of language but of culture, confirming that what is hilarious for Americans (her intended audience) is not necessarily funny for Iranians.

This is significant because, as the native informant memoirist, she literally translates Iranian culture into American terms so that her Anglophone readers can better understand her perspective. Of course, there is a clear advantage to this strategy, since Dumas validates her place in American society. In her work, she weaves together a narrative about the model immigrant who strives to break through the traditional aspects of her own culture in order to assimilate into American culture. This narrative technique allows her to sketch out a personal and less-threatening portrait of an Iranian to her American audience. Following the aftermath of 9/11 and Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, Iranian writers, in particular, have been eager to promote a more positive and individualized image of Iranians (especially Muslims). By using American humor in her memoirs, she is clearly signaling her audience: a Western readership, among whom there may be those prejudiced against Muslims, Iranians, or both.

While Dumas's work is not as critical about the politics of the theocratic government of Iran as is Satrapi's *Persepolis*,¹² the use of humor in her work has potential to solve inter-cultural tension. In Dumas's case, the author attempts to mediate between Iranian national pride and American hostility toward Iranians. Indeed, scholar Ulrike Erichsen confirms this notion, observing, "Humour can be used as a means to defuse such cultural conflicts by offering a strictly limited context for such conflict ... In such cases, humor can have a socially regulatory function, providing an outlet for criticism without aggravating the initial conflict" (30). Even though Dumas refrains from overt political criticism against the Iranian and American governments, her socio-politically moderate text is productive in so far as it points out the racial

tension of the 1980s between Americans and Iranian immigrants. The type of humor she employs does not offer viable solutions to overturning American racism, but rather comically, and perhaps even diplomatically, points out the cultural barriers and prejudices that the reader must cast aside in order to fully grasp the meaning of her perspective in the text. Her narrative might encourage intercultural dialogue, which for many Iranian American memoirists is the point of writing an autobiographical account.

Self-Mocking and Linguistic Acrobatics in Funny in Farsi

In her memoirs, Dumas fluctuates between polarizing views, since she often idealizes American society at the expense of her Iranian ethnic identity. She is often aware of, if not shameful about, her own foreignness, which she gauges through a comparison to American values. Dumas's polarizing views are attributed to her liminality between Iranian and American cultures.¹³ In fear of being ostracized as a threatening foreigner, she often plays the role of the model immigrant and validates an American master narrative demanding émigrés to assimilate, regardless of the reasons for their displacement. Just as many Iranian diasporic writers exist in a liminal space, stretched between an Iranian heritage and an adopted citizenship, so, too, does the subgenre of the humorous memoir exist, straddling the lines between fiction and nonfiction, oscillating between creativity and critical analysis.

At the forefront of Dumas's memoir are her issues with identity, especially as she struggles to balance her Iranian identity with her new American surroundings. She uses humor, especially when she is self-conscious, to discuss her vacillation between cultural pride and shame as she attempts to assimilate into American culture. Most notably, she focuses on language as a distinguishing factor between her family and the rest of America. In the first chapter of her first memoir, Dumas employs a comedic retelling of her family's immigration to the United States,

focusing her critique on language and mispronunciation to mirror her desire for American cultural assimilation. When imitating her mother's accent, Firoozeh notes, "her accent made it incomprehensible. 'W' and 'th' gave her the most difficulty. As if God were playing a linguistic joke on us, we lived in Veetee-er, we shopped at Veetwood Plaza, I attended Leffingvell School, and our neighbor was none other than 'Valter Villiams'" (Dumas, *Funny* 11). Her repeated use of the "V" sound to affect the Iranian mispronunciation of "W" signals the author's uneasiness with her family's inability to assimilate. Additionally, Firoozeh narrates her confusion about American idioms, such as mistaking elbow grease for a cleaning product to remove an oil stain from the carpet. By identifying the irony in the situation (that her new school and city should be riddled with Ws when that is the only Roman sound without an equivalent in Persian), she reflects both her self-conscious and overwhelming desire to acclimate to her surroundings to escape being different from the other children.

When she is self-conscious, Firoozeh attempts to neutralize moments of cultural tension between Iranians and Americans with humor. If humor "bridg(es) gaps by defusing the opposition between the self and other," then Dumas's narrative permits her to cope with what others may ridicule (Erichsen 41). This is one way of reading Dumas's moments of embarrassment, where she recounts imperial American discourse ridiculing the Iranian "other." By critiquing her mother's heavy Persian accent and her own ignorance about American idioms, Dumas draws attention to those issues about which many immigrants are self-conscious: their linguistic skills and difficulty communicating. On one hand, the author speaks from the perspective of a teenage child who is working through her supposed abnormality in American society, while on the other hand, she internalizes the American view of foreignness when she critiques her mother's mispronunciation of the English language. This can become problematic,

since as the native informant and literary go-between, she legitimates American master narratives advocating assimilation.

In addition to her mother, her father also lacks English fluency, about which Dumas repeatedly makes fun in an attempt to disassociate from being different from the other children. Recounting her father's linguistic challenges, the child-like voice of Firoozeh recounts, "my father spoke a version of English not yet shared with the rest of America. His attempts to find a 'vater closet' in a department store would usually lead us to the drinking fountain or the home furnishings section" (8). She continues to mock, "Somewhere between his thick Persian accent and his use of vocabulary found in pre-World War II British textbooks, my father spoke a private language. That nobody understood him hurt his pride, so what he lacked in speaking ability, he made up for by reading" (9). Though her father studied in Texas as a Fulbright scholar before her family moved to California in 1972, he did not develop a fluency of the language. Apart from their appearance, which is already foreign, linguistic command is the second category by which immigrants are socially judged. While her father's language struggles are somewhat normal for many immigrants, Dumas is particularly self-conscious about this.

Here, Dumas points out cultural conflicts without needing to resolve them. As the native informant, she attempts to mediate between both cultural groups. In this way, the author uses a comedic episode to point out the cultural misunderstandings for new foreigners in America. She might garner sympathy typically unreserved for migrants. Dumas, who is attune to American prejudice toward foreigners, uses humor to mock her family's linguistic inability as comedic fodder to drive her memoir forward. At the same time, however, she validates American standards for social acceptance, which can be problematic because they fail to account for the financial and political hardships that immigrants might be facing. As part of the master narrative

of American imperialism, immigrants are expected to quickly acclimate and become American. Thus, her work is not just funny, it is funny and a little tragic in eliding the bigger questions surrounding Iranian American identity after the 1979 Revolution and the 1980s hostage crisis.

In *Funny in Farsi*, the author represents herself and many Iranians as wanting to assimilate into American society, since many Iranians in her memoir strive to fit into the various American practices surrounding them. She often explains her culture and identity in American terms. For instance, when she is first introduced to a Persian cat, she states, “That was news to us; the only cats we had ever seen back home were the mangy strays that ate scraps behind people’s houses. From that day, when I told people I was from Iran, I added ‘where Persian cats come from.’ That impressed them” (33). Because the Iranian hostage crisis, which held captive American citizens at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, took place between the years of 1979 and 1981, this was a critical time for Dumas, who claims to have desired wanting to blend in with Americans. In an effort to promote a less-threatening Iranian image to Americans, the child persona of Dumas uses this example as means to neutralize the negative reactions toward Iranians with the more positive and benign, albeit incorrect, association with Persian cats.¹⁴

Rather than correct the inaccurate assumption that Persian cats are from Iran, Dumas instead adopts an American view of the world to more easily introduce herself. Granted, by writing her narrative in English, Dumas has already chosen her audience and renders her memoir fully accessible and more palatable to American readers. It is perhaps for this reason that she chooses to wear her American mask, so to speak, and as a child presents her country in exotic, yet safe, terms that appeal to Americans. Because it is easier for her to associate with non-ethnic Americans in their terms, she does very little to resist using their views. Unlike her 1979

revolutionary counterparts, who demonstrated against imperial influences in Iran, in her memoir, Dumas is uncritical about America's role in the politics surrounding the revolution.

Although Dumas clearly demonstrates her uneasiness with her linguistic and cultural differences from Americans, there are a few moments wherein she recuperates the Persian language, the notion of foreignness, and bilingualism, while also critiquing American homogeneity. At these moments, her memoir has "productive potential" (Erichsen 30). The autobiographical subject, Firoozeh, challenges the ignorance of Americans, posing the question:

Have Americans ever realized the great scope of the guttural sounds they're missing? Okay, so it has to do with linguistic roots, but I do believe this would be a richer country if all Americans could do a little tongue aerobics and learn to pronounce "kh," a sound more commonly associated in the culture with phlegm, or "gh," the sound usually made by actors in the final moments of a choking scene. It's like adding a few new spices to the kitchen pantry. Move over, cinnamon and nutmeg, make way for cardamom and sumac (Dumas 62-3).

Likening the Persian language to linguistic acrobatics, she brings humor to the discussion about Iranian foreignness in the United States. Rather than highlight the so-called deficiencies that Iranians possess as foreigners, she, instead, champions the Persian language as something to be valued (despite, as she says, its ability to sound like phlegm in one's throat). Yet, although she begins this passage by critiquing the pejorative view that Americans possess about the Persian language, she concludes with a somewhat cliché recommendation for multicultural harmony: to add ethnic spices to the metaphorical spice rack representing American society.

The spice motif is one that Dumas reuses throughout her first memoir to compare the merger of Iranians and Americans to the simple metaphor of bringing eclectic spices together in

a collective.¹⁵ In doing so, Dumas recalls the “exotic” spices of the East, which are so often used in Orientalist portrayals of Iran. Additionally, when recounting the differences between her Iranian childhood and her American adulthood, Firoozeh notes, “My Christmas kitchen smells of ginger, chocolate, and cinnamon. In my childhood kitchen, Nowruz smelled of cardamom, roasted pistachios, and rose water” (109). Perhaps, it is because of this juxtaposition between fragrances from the Persian New Year and spices from Christmas that Dumas translated the Persian title of her first book as *Scents of Hyacinths, Scents of Pine*.¹⁶ The comparison between Persian New Year and Christmas, and her acknowledgement of these holidays as part of her life, suggest there is a fusion of two cultures to make way for a hybrid one. These references rather simplify cultural difference through the allegory of cooking spices, since they reduce the larger issues she faces as she sways between Iranian and American cultures. On one hand, the spice motif plainly shows the conflict of the émigré or refugee who is forced to reconcile a bicultural surrounding, while on the other hand, this overly simplistic comparison risks reducing the larger issue to a juvenile metaphor.

In her writing, Dumas shifts between subtle critiques of ignorance about Iranian culture and her desire for assimilation into American culture. They are two competing desires that make for a somewhat-schizophrenic reading of her memoirs. Perhaps this speaks to her liminality, wherein she is pulled between two cultures. By examining the contradictory points of views throughout her memoir, one might imagine that it is rightfully hard for Firoozeh to fix her own identity. Identity can be mutable, constantly changing and shifting, for Firoozeh, especially since she juggles Iranian and American cultures. The conflicts in her work signal the notion that Firoozeh is not as assimilated into American culture as she would have her American audience believe.

***Masks, Masking and Masquerading:
Narratives of Passing and Identity Fragmentation***

While at times, Dumas unquestioningly strives to assimilate into American culture, there are moments throughout her work wherein she attempts to bolster Iranian social standing by pointing out American racism toward Iranians and Muslims. Through humor, Dumas complicates engendered and racialized discourses about Iranian women in her comedic memoir. She is able to contend with Islamophobia, confront the issues within her own community, and document personal, political, and social transformations in the process. By using a mocking tone, Dumas comments on the precarious position of her identity in the United States. In reference to her interactions with Americans, she states:

Sometimes, mentioning that I was from Iran completely ended the conversation. I never knew why, but I assume some feared that I might really be yet another female terrorist masquerading as a history of art major at UC-Berkeley. My favorite category of question, however, assumed that all Iranians were really just one big family: “Do you know Ali Akbari in Cincinnati?” people would ask. “He’s so nice.” (40)

At first, Firoozeh points out the hostilities that Americans felt toward Iranians, drawing references to the perception of Iranians as potential terrorists. Yet, she undermines this notion by pointing out the ridiculousness of the claim, especially since she is a U.C. Berkeley student. By revealing her scholarly affiliation, she not only undermines American misperceptions that Iranians are uncivilized and menacing, but she also subtly legitimates her voice as educated through her affiliation with a prestigious university. Additionally, she further distances herself from the threat of terrorism by claiming a major as innocuous as the study of art history. The image of masquerading resurfaces in this passage, as she points out that she is not a terrorist

merely posing as a student. While she rejects the idea of being a terrorist masquerading as a student (because she is, in fact a student), the notion of masquerade here is not so far fetched. Ironically, she brings this notion to the reader's attention, denying it at first, despite the fact that she later poses as either French or American.

While Dumas's commentary on discrimination takes place during the 1980s Iranian hostage crisis, her discussion of racism against Iranians is very applicable today in the wake of 9/11. Through the use of a comedic tone, Dumas jumbles the American misperception that Iranians are secretly terrorists with the notion that they are also "one big family." Dumas parodies a terrorist cell, replacing it with the notion of "one big family." While both groups present a mental image consisting of a hierarchical network of members, the family structure is a much more benign concept than a terrorist organization.

This writing formula is very typical for Dumas, wherein she introduces a serious topic and closely follows it with comic relief. She reuses the formula when she discusses the Iran/U.S. hostage crisis, stating, "Nobody asked our opinion of whether the hostages should be taken, and yet every single Iranian in America was paying the price. One kid throws a spitball and the whole class gets detention" (118). She introduces the serious topic of the hostage crisis, but to reduce its severity, she follows with a less-serious observation, attempting to soften the tension of the moment with her comment about the spitball-throwing kid. She completely omits a discussion about Iranian political motivations for the hostage crisis, never once acknowledging American implications in the 1979 Revolution, the hostage crisis, and the Iran Contra scandal. Instead, she lessens the severity of the events surrounding the revolution and hostage crisis in Iran, likening some revolutionaries to children misbehaving in class. It seems that Dumas strives to build group cohesion with Americans rather than with Iranians in Iran. Indeed, she attempts to

stabilize the Iranian community in the United States, but by aligning them with an American political view and by distancing herself from revolutionaries in Iran. In this way, she uses humor to potentially neutralize global negativity directed at Iranians.

While most of Dumas's humorous stories focus on her self-conscious awareness of differing from White Americans, there are a few solemn moments in which she attempts to critique the racism of 1980s America, particularly during the U.S. hostage crisis in Iran. Injecting comedy into her very serious critiques, Dumas recounts:

With each passing day, palpable hatred grew among many Americans, hatred not just of the hostage takers but of all Iranians. The media didn't help. We opened our local paper one day to the screaming headline "Iranian Robs Grocery Store." Iran has as many fruits and nuts as the next country, but it seemed as if every lowlife who happened to be Iranian was now getting his fifteen minutes of fame.

Vendors started selling T-shirts and bumper stickers that said "Iranians Go Home" and "Wanted: Iranians for Target Practice." Crimes against Iranians increased. People would hear my mother's thick accent and ask us, "Where are you from?" They weren't looking for a recipe for stuffed grape leaves. Many Iranians suddenly became Turkish, Russian, or French. (117)

Her critique serves as an artifact in determining the social conditions for Iranians in America during the 1980s, since she had been living in the United States for six years prior to the 1979 Revolution and had a chance to compare American reception of Iranians before and after the revolution. Yet, while in the beginning of the passage, Dumas recounts the hardships Iranians had faced, toward its end, she is pressing for their need to pass for European, such as the French,

Russians, and even E.U.-seeking Turks (who in comparison are typically lighter in coloring than Iranians). She comments on the way in which Iranians often use their ability to pass for other ethnicities as an alternative solution to thwart American hostility. By re-invoking the metaphor of the mask, I argue that many Iranians can choose which face to show and which narrative to tell their public, particularly in the genre of memoir. Though this passage is not as humorous as others in her text, it underscores the analysis that she conducts in other instances wherein she fuses humor with social critique to make her point.

Perhaps one of the most important issues at the heart of Dumas's humorous memoir is her negotiation and renegotiation of her ethnic identity in the United States. That is to say, Dumas presents conflicting images of her ability, and sometimes inability, to pass as someone other than Iranian. Dumas privileges lightness and whiteness, which can be traced back to her mother's ability to pass as a European in Iran. In the southern city of Abadan, where many Iranians are swarthy from the sunny desert climate, Firoozeh's mother Nazireh, who is fair-skinned, is often mistaken as a Russian or European. She is approached as the "exotic" Western "other," and is often privileged in ways that darker Iranians are not, thus demonstrating an Iranian fascination with the emulation of Western culture.¹⁷ When talking about her father's privileging of race, Dumas recounts, "Like most Iranians, my father preferred a fair-skinned woman with straight, light-colored hair. Having spent a year in America as a Fulbright scholar, he had returned with a photo of a woman he found attractive and asked his sister, Sedigeh, to find someone who resembled her" (5). In this passage, she creates a comedic sketch in the style of a situation comedy to critique the way in which her father searches for his wife. As if ordering from a mail-order bride catalog, her father Kazem browses for his future wife by way of requesting a special look for his sister to find. Wife hunting becomes as trivial as looking

through a magazine and selecting a desirable bride. Her mother is valued because of her fair skin and is rewarded with a suitor. More importantly, however, Dumas introduces early on in her memoir the importance that passing will play as a recurring motif throughout her life and, consequently, her memoir.

As mentioned earlier in Dumas's reincarnation as a French woman, Dumas possesses the ability to pass for many different ethnicities and notes the advantages throughout her memoir. When it is convenient for her in either Iran or the United States, she passes for someone lighter and fairer. In a different cultural context, however, racial passing can follow along the darker colors of the spectrum. For instance, in the United States, Firoozeh is mistaken for a Latina. In Southern California, where there is a high number of Mexicans, she is seen as blending in, without drawing attention to herself as a potentially threatening Iranian. This is particularly evident when she claims, "With its large Mexican population, Whittier could have passed as our hometown. As long as we didn't open our mouths, we looked as if we belonged" (37). Someone ethnic becomes Mexican, as White Americans assume she must be Mexican if she looks slightly foreign or even tanned from the California sun. The objective here, as Dumas points out, is to pass for anyone other than Iranian. She follows this passage by declaring that should there be confusion in reincarnating her as a Swede in her next life, she will pose as a Frenchwoman (41). This preoccupation with French identity resurfaces throughout her memoir as Firoozeh Jazayeri marries a Frenchman and transforms into Julie Dumas.

Dumas introduces the politics of naming and the complexity of passing very early on in her memoir, and draws attention to the difficulties that her ethnic name brings, consequently opting to adopt a French name, instead. In her chapter entitled "F word," Dumas talks about the politics of her first and last names in an American context, drawing comparisons between an

American expletive and her first name, Firoozeh. Although Dumas does not mention her Persian maiden name (Jazayeri) until the end of the second reprinting (the paperback edition) of her memoir, she only mentions that it has “eight letters, including a z and four syllables” to make it as “difficult and foreign” as her first name (64). To simplify her name, she adopts the Anglo-French first name of Julie to avoid being called “Fritzy” or any other variation of Firoozeh (65). Donning her American mask in elementary school, Firoozeh becomes Julie Jazayeri, stating:

Thus, I started sixth grade with my new, easy name [Julie] ... All was well until the Iranian Revolution, when I found myself with a new set of problems. Because I spoke English without an accent and was known as Julie, people assumed I was American. This meant that I was often privy to their real feelings about those damn “I-raynians.” It was like having those X-ray glasses that let you see people naked, except that what I was seeing was far uglier than people’s underwear. (65)

Dumas’s own renaming is significant because it undermines the self/other dynamic in the parent/child relationship, and creates a new one in her alter ego, who is being renamed. As Judith Butler notes in *Excitable Speech*, through the act of renaming, “One is, as it were, brought into social location and time” (29). But if one is usually dependent on someone else to designate an identity associated with a name, then what happens when the subject renames herself? In the text, Dumas renames herself many times, as evidenced in her multiple transformations: from Firoozeh Jazayeri to Julie Jazayeri to Julie Dumas to Firoozeh Dumas. These instances could be seen as moments of defiance, which denies the social authority of the parental figure naming the child. The author takes control and shapes the social sphere in which she resides. But more so, the process of renaming and the affectation of Euro–American identities are problematic for Dumas, who struggles to assert her ethnic identity in America.

While it seems that her newly adopted American identity is initially favorable, Dumas points out that there are many difficulties associated with passing, especially when infiltrating the “enemy camp.” While many Americans surrounding Dumas in the 1980s make stereotypical judgments and jokes about Iranians, the author becomes the displaced object at the butt of the joke, who in disguise poses as the subject. There exists an oppositional relationship between the teller of the joke and its subject, about whom the joke is composed. In most cases, the humor of the joke intends to humiliate a common “enemy,” while at the same time, bringing together the community of the joke teller (Richter 63). While the joke elicits laughter, it is not necessarily “funny,” and often hostile in the aim of creating a hierarchical relationship between the teller and the subject of the joke (Freud 98).

In the colonial context, the joke often preserving stereotypes privileges the colonial master, while ridiculing and dehumanizing the colonized subject. It forms a “coalition” between the first-person teller of the joke and the third-person receiver, who listens and laughs at the expense of the second person, who is at the butt of the joke (126). Normally, as Firoozeh, the author would serve as the object of scrutiny or derision of a stereotype joke, but as Julie, she becomes the subject and automatically privy to the racist feelings of the joke teller. By listening to a racist joke about Iranians, she transgresses from one coalition to another, crossing the boundary between the communities of foreigner and local citizen (befitting the role of the native informant).

The author continues to discuss the complications of passing and self-transformation, marking the slippage between Iranian, American, and French identities in her transition from Firoozeh Jazayeri to Julie Jazayeri and finally to Julie Dumas. Recalling the change in her identity, Dumas states, “Once I got married, my name became Julie Dumas. I went from having

an identifiably ‘ethnic’ name to having ancestors who wore clogs” (Dumas 65). Through the process of renaming, Dumas acquires a new European ancestry, though feigned. Though she uses sarcasm to comment on the change in her circumstances, she is not too critical about how she is perceived as Julie Dumas until she discusses the difficulty of reconciling Firoozeh Jazayeri with Julie Dumas. About her alter ego, she recounts:

My life became one big knot, especially when friends who knew me as Julie met friends who knew me as Firoozeh. I felt like those characters in soap operas who have an evil twin. The two, of course, can never be in the same room, since they’re played by the same person, a struggling actress who wears a wig to play one of the twins and dreams of moving on to bigger and better roles. (65-6)

Through this description, one can almost visualize the comedic way in which the diabolical doppelgänger steals the stage. Dumas’s identity fragmentation becomes obvious as she metaphorically envisions the splitting of her identity into the self and the other. Pitted against each other, the two personas embody an ethnic Iranian heritage and a culturally assimilative American identity. At school, Firoozeh Jazayeri creates Julie to mask her Iranian characteristics, eventually leading later in life to a full disguise in the guise of Julie Dumas. As masking turns into masquerading, Dumas demonstrates that identity is nothing more than a performance. Rather than reconcile her personas as two integrated halves of a whole, Dumas fixates on the fissures of her fragmented identity. She discusses a very serious phenomenon for Iranian Americans, who struggle to reconcile two very different cultures, while dismissing the severity of the issue with her mocking portrayal of an aspiring actress. Dumas uses humor to negotiate an identity that can pass for an ethnicity other than Iranian, but at the same time she troubles this passing.

It becomes problematic for Dumas to contend with two competing selves that she has created through her own renaming and ability to pass for White. In her discussion about ethnic passing, Miri Song discusses racial passing in African American literature (one of the more infamous examples of passing in ethnic–American literature) to open up a space for other ethnic–Americans. In her text, *Choosing Ethnic Identity*, Song points out the historicized politics of passing for the African American community, stating, that passing has been used as a “resource,” albeit a problematic one, which initially enabled those passing to attain non-White status. Song asserts, “To pass as White, historically, has meant the difference between occupying a subordinate, often despised position and occupying a privileged, powerful position in White majority societies” (Song 68). Because racial passing operates on the assumption that the subject voluntarily acknowledges that they would otherwise be subordinate to those who are White—whether those in a dominant position are colonizers or nationals of the new host country—it certainly bears a negative connotation, especially for more nuanced readers. As with the metaphor of the mask, Dumas only has to choose which identity she will perform to better assimilate into American life. The divide between Firoozeh and Julie illuminates the *show* that an immigrant affects in order to fulfill the American dream. But while many readers are quick to condemn Dumas’s intentional passing as a White American, they might be overlooking “the emotional and psychological cost involved in the effort of passing” (69). Clearly, Dumas is torn between her two competing selves, drawing attention to the personal and cultural confusion that passing may bring.

Because Dumas switches between her Iranian, French, and American personas, perhaps another way to read her multiple ethnic identities is a dialogic split,¹⁸ wherein she possesses competing voices. After all, as Mikhail Bakhtin points out, “the word in language is half

someone else's" (Bakhtin 293). A monologue is not so internal in literature and in this vein, one voice may be critiquing or parodying another (46). This results in a carnivalized discourse, about which, one must ask, which voice is Dumas mocking? Is it the Iranian-born Firoozeh Jazayeri or French-transplant Julie Dumas? I argue that it is both; at times she switches between her critiques of the standout foreigner and the pitfalls of American culture to make for a schizophrenic portrayal of the self in transit. It is interesting that though she attempts to Americanize or Westernize her identity and lifestyle, the closest she can come to achieving this is by donning a pseudo-French identity. She never completely becomes American in name, as do so many other foreigners who opt for full name changes.

Through her carnivalesque portrayal of the struggling ethnic-American, Dumas attempts to garner the reader's sympathy in describing what it feels like for an immigrant caught between two cultural contexts. To her credit, she troubles passing as a solution that makes way for an easier life. Rather, she demonstrates the difficulty in transforming one's identity in the so-called West. Though she seems to advocate for passing at other moments in her memoir, in this instance, she problematizes the internal conflict that passing brings. She does not necessarily undermine or completely subvert established hierarchies in the aforementioned example, but rather points out the conflict at stake for the native informant without feeling the need to offer a solution. Dumas's work could, indeed, be seen as having productive potential, since she draws attention to the heavy costs of cultural assimilation for immigrants in the United States.

In her memoir, Dumas jokingly offers the following conclusive statement about tense race relations between the East and West, "I believe peace in the Middle East could be achieved if the various leaders held their discussions in front of a giant bowl of Persian ice cream, each leader with his own silver spoon. Political differences would melt with every mouthful" (106).

She avoids overtly critiquing Iranian/American politics by allowing her use of humor to point out ironic or contradictory instances. Within her work, the author in some ways mocks the Western imaginary in Iran and the imperial presence, though she is not critical about American involvement in the tense politics surrounding 1980s Iran and her assimilation into that culture. In her memoir, she places herself within the role of the funny native informant in order to dispel negative stereotypes to American audiences; but at the same time, she poses herself as an entertainer who must appeal to her American readership. She further embodies this role by playing up the position of the model immigrant, who must unquestioningly acclimate and assimilate into American culture.

Throughout her memoir, Dumas asserts the similarities between Iranians and Americans, without making strong political statements against the two, optimistically urging readers of all ethnicities: “Can’t we all just get along?”¹⁹ Her work is important for literary discussion, as it is an artifact of contemporary Iranian American literature. The way in which Dumas uses humor in her autobiography is innovative, as she blends her life story with the art of humorous Scheherazadian storytelling. Furthermore, the motif of racial passing sheds light on the complexity of forming an American identity for many Iranians, especially during politically terse times. As Dumas illuminates throughout her text, masking becomes masquerading in the fissuring of the Iranian self who attempts to pass for a White American and/or European. Her text is productive in illustrating the ways in which Iranian Americans struggle to claim an American identity for themselves, despite the popular misperception that they are un-American because they are associated with Islam and the Middle East. A memoirist such as Marjane Satrapi, on the other hand, acknowledges the possibility of racial passing, but in contrast, quickly denies it in her memoir during her reclamation of Iranian identity. Instead, Satrapi uses humor to

critique and unmask the hypocrisies of the 1979 Revolution and its consequent theocratic government.

Cartooning and Llamponing Iranian Politics in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis Series

Llampoons and satires, that are written with wit and spirit,
Are like poisoned darts, which not only inflict a wound,
But made it incurable. — Joseph Addison, *Cheeky Fictions*

Just as Dumas's unique use of humorous short vignettes makes way for a creative retelling of one's life story, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series is also exemplary of the comic subgenre of life writing, retelling her life story through cartoon illustrations considered part of the newly emerging genre of the graphic memoir. As a graphic memoir recalling a childhood fundamentally shaped by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Satrapi's text borrows from the illustrative style of the comic book genre. It employs stunningly simple sketches to depict both the witnessed and imagined traumatic moments from her past, recalling torture, mass execution, bombings, war, and revolution. Comics are the perfect medium for the transmission of irony, as they allow the writer to communicate sorrow and tragedy vis-à-vis the childish sketching of cartoons. Satrapi draws many images from a child's perspective to highlight their incongruity with childhood, while at the same time, she combines laughter and ironic imagery to help readers remain engaged throughout a difficult and often-times tragic story.

Initially written in four installments in French, Satrapi's *Persepolis* was later translated into English (in addition to twelve other languages), and compiled into two larger volumes re-titled as *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (Malek 367). Though in English, both parts were compiled as *The Complete Persepolis* in celebration of the release of her animated feature by the same moniker; for the purposes of this study, I will use

Persepolis and *Persepolis 2*, since they are separated by important life events: the first memoir focuses on the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Satrapi's departure from Iran, while the second depicts Satrapi's return to Iran and final departure to France.

Occupying the space between the genres of memoir and comic book, graphic memoir has gained popularity with Jewish American writer Art Spiegelman's *Maus* published in 1986 (technically a biography) and French author David Beauchard's *l'Ascension du Haut Mal* (also known as *Epileptic* in English), which was published in six installments from 1996–2003.²⁰ Both cartoonists have artistically influenced Satrapi's use of the graphic narrative to convey personal testimony. Even though David B. (Beauchard's pen name) is known to have been Satrapi's mentor in drawing in the Franco–Belgian style of comics known as *les bandes dessinées* (B.D.), her style is closer to Art Spiegelman's, in his use of the graphic narrative genre, sarcasm, ethnic Jewish American humor, and representation of war trauma in *Maus* (which recasts German Nazis and Jews as cats and mice, respectively, to create a cipher for readers). Although Satrapi's drawing style is reminiscent of David B.'s in *l'Ascension du Haut Mal*, because his text focuses on the malady of the author's brother (as part of the growing genre of illness narratives), *Persepolis* resembles *Maus* in form and theme. David B., who is French and writes from the center of French publishing, rather than on the periphery,²¹ as do many ethnic–French writers such as Marjane Satrapi, or Jewish American Art Spiegelman. Satrapi contemplates form similarly to Spiegelman, since both authors rely on the space and time that “the gutters and frames of comics” create in order to help readers digest traumatic scenes. Despite these similarities, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series stands apart from both Spiegelman and David B.'s works in that it details the autobiographical story of the writer, casting her as the autobiographical subject.

Satrapi begins *Persepolis* by depicting her childhood during the height of the revolution and continues to narrate the eight-year war with Iraq, her hurried escape to Vienna, and her eventual return to Iran. After moving back to Iran in *Persepolis 2*, she finds failed expectations and an inability to completely re-immense into the drastically changed Iranian society, prompting her to move to France in 1994, where she has been living since. She experiences a double exile throughout her memoir: first, when she moves to Vienna alone, living in exile and isolation as a foreigner and French-speaker in a German-speaking city; and secondly, when she returns to Iran and experiences a social alienation among the rise of the Islamist ruling class. Whereas in *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas recounts the support of her family when relocating to California, Satrapi's memoir does not focus on the collective family unit commonly associated with Iranian culture, but on the experience of the individual who attempts to rebound from a post-war era.²²

Like Firoozeh Dumas, she portrays the straddling of cultures as a fragmentation of the self, yet Satrapi resolves this internal division differently: through the illustration of her hybrid identity as a unified whole.²³ When evaluating Satrapi's personal liminality, which she visually depicts throughout her memoir series, one is reminded of Dumas's fragmented identity. This caricature of a unified self is neither here nor there, occupying an in-between, tertiary space. In Satrapi's work, it seems that in-betweenness is a productive alternative space in which the author is able to confront her memory and trauma during the revolution, while simultaneously negotiating her Iranian origin and new European surroundings. After returning to Iran from Vienna, she feels all the more alienated for having escaped the war and somewhat assimilated to European society. Satrapi makes reference to her in-betweenness in *Persepolis 2*, recalling, "I was nothing. I was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. I had no identity" (Satrapi *Persepolis 2* 118). This phenomenon of the double exile is what drives the narrative forward, the constant

quest for self, despite the many autobiographical “I’s” narrating Marjane’s story. I will expand upon her liminal position between cultures by conducting a close reading of Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series, observing the instances in which Satrapi uses in-betweenness to defy concrete textual, personal, ideological, physical, and geographical borders.

Not only does Satrapi exist within a tertiary space in-between Iran and Austria, but her graphic memoir also defies the traditional spaces of the genre, existing between graphic novel and autobiography. Because Satrapi’s work incorporates both the genres of comic book and memoir, and because she portrays herself as in-between Iranian and European cultures, I am interested in her humorous and visual depictions of her liminality within the text. In reference to this new genre, Gillian Whitlock has coined the phrase “autographic,” which calls attention to the representational strategies of graphic memoirs and the dialogue that Satrapi enables by cartooning (Whitlock “Autographics” 966). By mirroring her cultural in-betweenness in the formal structure of the work, Satrapi uses the genre of the graphic memoir to critically recapture her traumatic witnessing of the 1979 Revolution. At the same time, Satrapi challenges Iranian politics today by making her own revisionist history through comedic parody and satire. By rehashing and recalling the 1979 Revolution in 2001 in the *Persepolis* series, Satrapi critiques the reoccurring resurgence of Islamic ideals in Iran, which today again threaten equality and freedom of speech. Using the genre of comics, she is better enabled to bring buried traumatic memories from her past to the surface of the present, with a focus on repairing the image of Iranians today in light of Iran’s damaged relations with the West, tension with Israel, and implications in 9/11 and the funding of terrorist groups. In a rather cyclical retracing and recalling of memories, Satrapi recycles her past experiences for the benefit of contemporary international relations with Iran and Iranians.

The cyclical redrawing of the past allows for Satrapi to use the act of repetition to her benefit, as it creates space to push self-discovery further. If memoirs require an exploration of the self, then the graphic memoir requires the author to draw and redraw herself at various stages of her life, tracing her progression from childhood to adulthood. As part of this series of repetitions, the reader observes numerous frames that depict mirrors and reflections, whether it depicts Marjane's reflection in the mirror, or images that mirror one another throughout the text. The frames of the comics are themselves mirrors of each other, since they visually echo concepts the author introduces in preceding frames. This field of vision is focused on not just the self, but on a reflection of the self in a Lacanian exploration of the self and the other, which is recast in a series of mirror stages throughout the memoir. When mirroring takes place, it suggests that Marjane is fragmented in some way, experiencing an internal division or conflict at a particular moment. Each scene reflects fragmentation that demonstrates a splitting of the self, or in some way, dual identity. Her reader observes halving and multiplication of Marjane, all during her quest for self and resolution of identity fragmentation. The author suggests that by embracing the halves, hybrid identity is potentially a better solution for fragmentation than is Dumas's initial recuperation of racial passing.

Examples of this phenomenon occur in moments when young Marji is unsure about how to keep herself unified, particularly during moments of trauma. One such instance occurs after Marji learns about the torture of two Communist prisoners, Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba. She does not know how to internalize this violence and incorporates torture into childhood games with friends. When looking into the mirror, her reflection shows devil's horns, which visually express her thoughts, "Back at home that evening, I had the diabolical feeling of power" (*Persepolis* 53). In the frame, her back is facing the audience, creating an intermediary between

the reader and the image of her reflection. The audience gazes at Marji gazing at herself in the mirror; creating a self/other dichotomy between Marji's exterior and interior selves. Marji's body occupies the space between the "devilish" self and the reader, showing her conflict between the two selves. In the next frame, Marji turns her back to the mirror and breaks down facing the

reader, crying "But it didn't last, I was overwhelmed" (53). Moving

from frame to frame, the reader

begins to witness the change within

Marji, as if she is pulled between

good and bad selves. Even in-



(Persepolis 53)

between the frames, in the white space of the gutters, the reader fills in the emotional change that must have been occurring for Marji, imagining her transition from feeling devilish to regretful.

Satrapi captures the essence of her fragmented self, particularly when experiencing and

internalizing her trauma. As in her confrontation with her grandfather's imprisonment, when

learning about her family friends' imprisonment, she shows a breaking down of self, which

attempts to make sense of violent actions.

Autographics and Graphic Memoirs: The New In-between Genre

As part of an innovative genre, Satrapi's memoir defies the traditional genre of autobiography through its disruption of conventional autobiographical writing with the use of comic strip frames. Often referred to as the autobiographical graphic narrative, I argue that the genre mimics the content of the text in creatively arguing for a more progressive representation of Iranians. Typically, mainstream Western media visually cues Iranians with images of a

bearded man or *Mullah* (Islamic clergy man) or of veiled woman, wearing the long black *chador*. When discussing why she wrote *Persepolis*, Satrapi states, “I didn’t see myself on the news,” which is why she chose to write a text like *Persepolis* (“Why I Wrote”). Additionally, in an interview with the Pantheon press staff (her American publishing house), Satrapi states, “From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about life in Iran to my friends. We’d see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn’t represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, ‘No, it’s not like that there.’ I’ve been justifying why it isn’t negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years” (Satrapi “On Writing...”). Many Iranian women writers in Euro-American countries have been trying to achieve the same feat of breaking through stereotypes, but the visual aesthetic of *Persepolis* makes for an interesting re-visualization of the average Iranian (from 1979 and beyond 9/11).

In exposing the many dimensions of Iranians, it seems that the new genre and medium of the graphic memoir is necessary for breaking through the monolithic images of Iranians as religious, backward, and terrorist. It is truly the genre of the in-between, as it takes from both comic books and memoirs, fusing them together as the newly popular graphic memoir. Both the textual and visual components are vital to the transmission of the self in this innovative life-writing genre. When reading comics, the reader engages in what Tammy Horn identifies as a “potentially transformative oscillation between words and pictures.” She quotes Lawrence Sipe as saying: “We must oscillate, as it were from the sign system of the verbal text to the sign system of the illustrations; and also in the opposite direction from the illustration sign system to the verbal sign system” (Sipe qtd. in Horn 97). Because there is active interpretation of the textual in pictures, and of pictures in the textual, there is a possibility of creating “new meanings,” which causes the viewer/reader to read and reread the text.

It is not surprising, then, that the visual nature of graphic memoirs creates an interactive experience for the reader. In reference to the emergence of graphic memoirs, Theresa Tensuan asserts it is “loiterature,” which Ross Chambers coined to mean “a genre which, in opposition to dominant forces of narrative, relies on techniques of digression, interruption, deferral, and episodicity” (Tensuan 950). Furthermore, cultural theorist Mary Pat Brady argues that loiterature “forces the reader to look around, to linger and remember” (Whitlock “Autographics” 951). Thus, it has the contrapuntal ability to create alternative meanings; it is able to “rupture itself, turning lyric moments into caustic humor, forcing a gap, like an exposed cut, between humor and bitter revelation” (951).

This type of innovation and literary loitering allows for the reader to take an active role in deciphering the comic memoir and make meaning of the combination of the visual and textual. The images and the dialogue play with one another. At times the image performs the text in the bubbles, expounds on it, compliments it, or demonstrates the exact opposite in an ironic gesture. With the fusion of text and dialogue in *le neuvieme art* (French for the ninth art), Satrapi is able to create a more comprehensive picture that sets the emotional landscape for her self-exploration. As a medium for expressing nostalgic memory, comics require a fair amount of “imaginative work of closure that readers are required to make between the panels on the page” (968–69). Each frame and series is connected by portraying a central idea or theme, but disconnected by the white area of the gutters, which disrupts the space and time logic of the comic strip. These gutters, which McCloud calls “limbo” and Naghibi and O’Malley call “aporia—blank spaces where new meanings can be generated and a distinctive cross-cultural translation can occur,” allow for comics to productively communicate the disorienting nature of trauma (McCloud 67,

Naghibi and O'Malley 246). Though they are spatial and temporal disruptions, the gutters allot a different kind of time and space for the reader to interpret the meaning of Marjane's trauma.

Despite all of this work, the reader voluntarily follows the protagonist and memoirist, Marjane, through her journey of self-discovery, which in a humanizing effort, likens a bad break-up to war wounds from 1979. Indeed, the avid reader of Muslim women's memoirs lingers, reading and seeing what it might have felt like to experience Satrapi's perspective as an Iranian and Muslim woman. The reader empathizes with her, more so than with the neo-Orientalist writers of the fake memoirs by Norma Khouri and Souad, who dreamt of captivating their readers in this way. By sincerely depicting the truth of her life story—flaws and all—Satrapi promotes the empathetic readership and witnessing encouraged by the genre of testimonials, while at the same time, she resists Orientalist depictions of Iran.

The text is productive in dispelling exaggerated stereotypes about Iranians, using the marriage of dialogue and illustration to create a new type of rhetoric about Iranians in Iran and Europe. Mirroring this concept in the reflection of her split identity, Satrapi often refers to herself as an Iranian in France, caught between two worlds, not unlike other ethnic writers in Euro-American societies. In a comparative frame, Marjane Satrapi is similar to Arab American writer Mohja Kahf, who must actively bridge the gap between racist Americans and American Muslims. Like Kahf, in *Persepolis* Satrapi uses form to create a new space of negotiation for the protagonist and her fellow Iranians. In texts such as *E-mails from Scheherazad* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf uses a series of inversions in her text to undermine the inaccurate assumptions of readers about Muslims, whereas in *Persepolis* Satrapi uses humor to similarly point out wrongful stereotypes to enhance her memoir, as a form of catharsis to contain and paradoxically unleash her trauma. In particular, I wish to investigate those moments in which the

textual liminality that Satrapi creates through the genre of graphic memoir mirrors depictions of her as a split self and how she uses humor to contend with this fragmentation. Her visual aesthetics possesses a satirical autobiographical perspective, while dislocating previous assumptions about the 1979 Revolution through the use of politically raw images that defy the current Islamic Regime's assertion that 1) the revolution was divinely ordained as glorious, 2) an Islamic state is a utopia and the regime facilitates this utopia, and 3) there is gender equality, and more social balance in Iran. Her critiques are just as prevalent today as they were in post-revolutionary Iran.

To convey the complexity of her memories, conversely, Satrapi's drawings are simple, stark in black in white to create what she calls "narrative drawing" (Chute 108). Hillary Chute notes that her technique of visualization is "monochromatic—there is no evident shading technique; she offers flat black and white" (Chute 98). Yet, her alternation between black and white and the use of shadows emits the emotion of each pane. To borrow from film theory, Satrapi usually employs the *positive* white and black to depict quotidian scenes, and the *negative* black and white to signal the weight of her memory during the recollection of traumatic moments (Stam). In reference to her style, Satrapi states that "the drawing itself is very simple" like the tradition of Persian miniatures. This is "the Iranian side [that] will always be with me" (Satrapi qtd. in Chute 98). The genius of using this uncomplicated cartooning lies in Satrapi's juxtaposition of simple lines and drawings to express overly complicated emotions and events from her life. If her texts need time for completion, it is because they are more a work of memory than of artistic endeavor. In the Press Kit for the film release of the animated feature, *Persepolis*, Satrapi states, "I make an important work of memory, I wrote a lot and I leave out all that is not essential. Inking afterwards do not take me much time. If I need a year for a book, it

is because of this work of memory” (*Persepolis* film Press Kit). Indeed, the author draws awareness to the politics of memory, which, in contrast to the simplicity of her drawings, are incredibly difficult to sift through.

Within the *shari'a* framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran, her use of graphics to depict religious rulers, prophets, and figures is dangerous. Both the Quran, through its depiction of Abraham and his rejection of idolatry, and the *hadiths*,²⁴ call for aniconism, which is a proscription against the creation of images depicting God, the Prophet, and, in some cases, people. Although the tradition of Persian miniatures of the past depict human, animal, and plant life (which Satrapi uses for inspiration), they were not seen as violating religious decree because they use a “non-illusory style” without “shadows and perspective” depicting reality (Beaudin 11). Bearing this in mind, Satrapi’s work is not aniconic, since she includes both shadow and perspective in the depiction of her human forms, particularly of religious figures.

Her shadows create dramatic effect, while indicating dimension. Satrapi’s use of the human form in a two-dimensional way contributes to her progressive depiction of Iranians during the twentieth century, also creating a space for a twenty-first century representation of the average Iranian in the minds of her readers. Not only are Iranians no longer monolithic or one dimensional, as often portrayed in Western media, but they are complicated, multifaceted, and multidimensional. Her use of cartooning in the Iranian context form (as a violation of aniconism) revives an innovative aesthetic that breaks with a traditionally religious identity associated with Iranian Muslims.

While many scholars believe that Satrapi’s use of cartooning is the first among Iranians, they are incorrect, since political cartooning has been longstanding in Iran (popular since the nineteenth century). Political satirists, such as Ardeshir Mohasses, drew cartoons and caricatures

during the mid-twentieth century.²⁵ Mohasses, along with others before him, proved the importance of political cartooning, lampooning, and mockery to critique social mores and national politics. Iranian memoirists who use satire and humor are more readily able to confront racial conflict and contend with cross-cultural mocking, as well as express the trauma of the past. In this light, like other Iranian political cartoonists before her, Satrapi can challenge political propaganda from monarchists and Islamists, since her caricatures and depictions are expressed through the fantastical world of cartooning. Though her caricatures are rooted in real events (such as war and torture), through the medium of cartooning, the author can lessen the severity of her graphics by using the creative and imaginary elements of the genre.

Satrapi's graphic representation of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian people, and God dissents from the aniconism of Islamic law, which renders her memoir as politically seditious and revolutionary. By including sarcastic and mocking dialogue along with her cartoons, her work correlates with Bakhtin's analysis of humor as having dissident potential; the work is as revolutionary as the 1979 Iranian

martyrs that she celebrates throughout *Persepolis*. For instance, when considering the frame depicting Karl Marx and her image of God, little



(*Persepolis* 13)

Marji, whom God visits frequently, remarks, “It was funny to see how much Marx and God looked like each other. Though Marx’s hair was a bit curlier” (*Persepolis* 13). Satrapi depicts Marx, alongside God, and exalts him to divinity while jesting about his curly hair. As a break with Islamic religious decree, Satrapi depicts the divine in illustrative form and explodes through

religious limitation in her visual retelling of the paradoxes of the revolution and her ensuing internal conflict.

Because Iranian, American, and European historians alike describe the revolution as occurring between the political poles of the royalists and the religious class, the Marxists often emerge as the forgotten in-between. This is particularly interesting considering that this is the perspective and politics that Satrapi takes up in her work. In this frame, Satrapi depicts the various modes of thinking during the revolution, which seemingly show a division between Marx/Marxism and God/religion. Yet, by bringing together in one single frame these two very different ideologies, which she represents through the figures of Marx and God, Satrapi subtly suggests that these varying ideologies and movements do not have to be at odds with one another.

Unlike Dumas, who avoids commenting on politics, Satrapi roots her text in the political sphere. Though these two texts both use varying forms of humor to narrate life story, they greatly differ in their potential for critiquing the rule of the Islamic Regime in Iran. Satrapi's child-like voice differs from the adult tone of other memoirs, lending itself as the perfect platform to narrate a comedic memoir. As an adult writing her bildungsroman memoir from the child's perspective, Satrapi is able to question norms that are usually accepted. Moreover, by using the comedic voice of the curious child, she is able to innocently make a comparison between Marx and God, which is a religiously defiant act.

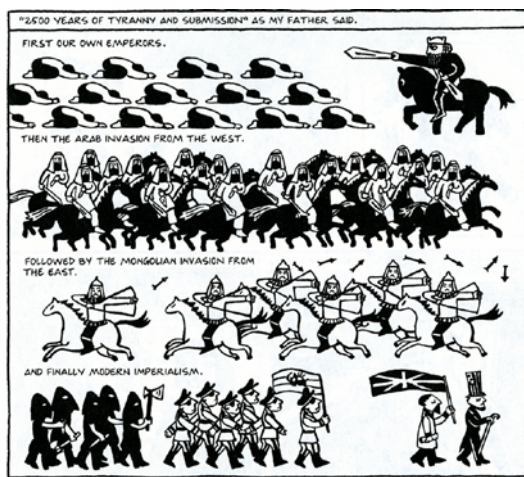
It seems then that by including the Marxist perspective and her romanticism of Marxists within her work, Satrapi calls attention to her martyrs of the revolution and creates a revisionist history in the process. As she reminds her readers in the introduction of her English translation, the purpose of writing *Persepolis* is to depict an Iran that complicates the "Axis of Evil" image,

in that the “nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists.” She continues to state, “I also don’t want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten. One can forgive but one should never forget” (Satrapi *Persepolis* 1). She weaves throughout her work the thread of the forgotten heroes of the revolution, who “lost their lives in prisons,” such as her uncle Anoush.

In fact, it is this act of remembering and the repetition of not forgetting that resurfaces throughout Satrapi’s memoir. When her uncle Anoush demands, “our family memory must not be lost. Even if it’s not easy for you, even if you don’t understand it all,” Marji replies, “I’ll never forget,” affirming to the reader that the act of drawing and recapturing her past constitutes this remembering (*Persepolis* 60). The genre of graphic memoir is particularly conducive to recalling and preserving memories, particularly traumatic ones, since they can be expressed through simplistic drawings, which can be cathartic forms of expression for the writer. Because cartooning abstracts an image, simplifying its detail and focus, it “isn’t just a way of drawing, it is a way of seeing” (McCloud 31). In this way, the reader accompanies Marji throughout her quest for knowledge and identity.

By cartooning, the author uses satire and humor to question the politics of her own identity and to provide alternative views of an Iranian nationalist discourse. By repackaging autobiographical writing as a graphic memoir, Satrapi creates a revisionist history that retells the events of the revolution from her perspective. Moreover, she moves beyond the text of traditional memoirs, pushing the genre into a new in-between territory that sits between memoir and the visual comic book. This tertiary space can be more freeing in allowing for a political memoirist to confront images and events from the past without the presence of crippling negative

associations. In the spirit of expressing Bakhtinian dissident potential, Satrapi's memoirs can be read as a politically defiant series to contemporary Iranian rule, since they challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. When representing Iran's 2,500-year history of the empire (up to the revolution), Satrapi uses a mocking tone to sketch out the severity and barbarism of the Persian emperors, Arab invaders, Mongol invaders, and imperial forces that continued the oppressive rule of Iran (*Persepolis* 11). Resisting the urge to Orientalize Iran, Satrapi instead critiques Western influences and interference in Iranian politics. She uses a



(*Persepolis* 11)

satirical tone to create her revisionist history of the past. Paralleling political cartoons previously published in Iranian newspapers from the early twentieth century, the frame encapsulating four oppressive regimes and three invasions of Iran mocks the perception that Iran was well governed before the revolution. Because the royal and

imperial forces of Iran's history violate the communist ideals shared by Marji and her family, the author creates a mocking portrait of the past, also implicating European and American imperialism, in case they are overlooked by her non-Iranian readers.

By creating an avant-garde text (both visually and textually), the writer pens from the margins of Iranian ideological culture—that is, from the communist perspective, which is sometimes forgotten in Iranian history and largely underrepresented in post-revolutionary writing. In so doing, she is able to create a sardonic laughter that is “caught up in the kinds of distinctions between centre and margins every society employs to establish and stabilize its identity” (Reichl and Steine 9). The satirical laughter she creates arises from her socialist

perspective, which mocks the ideological power center of the Islamic Republic, challenging its established orthodoxies, authorities, and hierarchies. By revisiting the failures of Iran's past tyrannical rulers and by linking them together with the 1979 Islamic Republic, Satrapi suggests that there is a cyclical critique to be made about Iranian dictatorship and rule. By recapturing her critique from 1979 in this frame, which was redrawn and published after the millennium, Satrapi reinforces criticisms of the Islamic Republic today, in opposition to their seemingly unified rule of the government.²⁶

To educate those who might not be familiar with Iranian history, the author takes great care in avoiding exotic and Orientalist portrayals of Iran, instead offering to "set the record straight." Her intended audience is clearly not Iranian, though Iranians can appreciate her Marxist rereading of national events. In fact, in an interview with Annie Tully for *Bookslut* in 2004, Satrapi said, "the book *Persepolis* I wrote for the other ones, not for Iranians" (Tully). In another interview, she adds "I wanted people to read this book and say, 'Oh, it could have been me' ... In today's world it is necessary that people read something like this, so they understand that this other that is so scary, this other that belongs to the 'axis of evil,' these people have a normal life" (L. Levy 35). She simplifies the narrative to better explain Iran to non-Iranians, which is one of her main motivators for publishing a life story rooted in the 1980s, just after the millennium, when tension with Iran, and therefore Iranians, has redoubled.

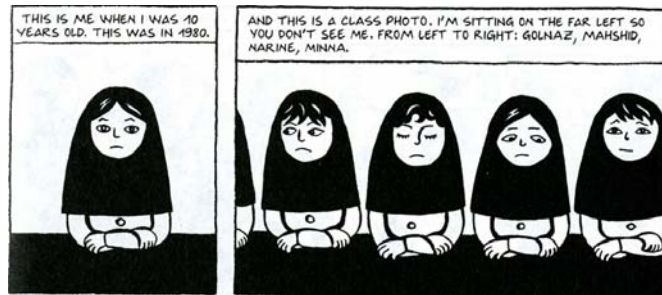
Marxism, Islam & Revolution: Personal In-betweenness and the Quest for Identity

Moving beyond textual in-betweenness, one can find many images in *Persepolis* that fuse humor, mockery, and sarcasm with personal in-betweenness. Satrapi problematizes her identity politics, which she often depicts as a physical or emotional fragmentation. For instance, in the opening scene of *Persepolis*, the protagonist, little Marji, is pictured wearing a veil she does not

understand and did not have to wear during the first ten years of her childhood (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 3). She critiques the veil through the perspective of the child avatar, who represents

young Marji, and who in the first frame introduces herself, “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980”

(3). Satrapi presents the childlike avatar of herself as isolated in the first



(*Persepolis* 3)

frame, while wearing the *maqnaeh*, which is the customary hooded headscarf assigned to school children and university students. Perhaps, because of the implementation of the veil, Marji is reluctant to join the collective of veiling girls in the next frame, anxious to depict herself as an individual within her own frame. In 1980, veiling had become compulsory after the installation of the Islamic Regime. While it was just one of the many changes to take place after the revolution, as a symbolic marker, the veil has become central in arguing for or against Islamic ideals in Iran, as it has been similarly viewed in other countries.

Perhaps it is no surprise that Satrapi opens her memoir with the chapter entitled “The Veil,” since at the time of publishing the first French edition of *Persepolis* in 2000, the “Scarf Affair” had been raising questions about public allowance of veiling in France. In depicting herself as a veiled child, Satrapi creates an unsettling image for her non-Iranian readers, in terms of what Naghibi and O’Malley refer to as the “dissonant combination of the familiar (the iconic cartoonish figure of the child) and the alien (the veiled and radically other)” (Naghibi and O’Malley 224). Following the first frame, Satrapi depicts her then-classmates, showing hardly any difference between the students, who are all veiled and sitting in a row. Satrapi exists outside of the frame, stating, “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me.

From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna” (3). She excludes herself from the group, perhaps in recognition of her isolation, and in anticipation of an identity forming outside of a public religious sphere. Though clearly religious internally, she does not believe in wearing the veil to prove religious devotion.

To undermine the legitimacy of state-enforced veiling, Satrapi introduces a humorous rendering of her schoolmates playing with the veil. Like Marji, the other children in the schoolyard do not know what to do with the veil and, therefore, play jump rope with it, or use it to saddle a friend in imitation of a horse, among other things (3). Each child-like figure is



(Persepolis 3)

depicted as having a unique relationship with the veil. Besides the children who make-believe the veil is part of an imaginary world of monsters and horses, there are two children who are particularly

interesting. One is veiled and choking another student who is unveiled, stating: “Execution in the Name of Freedom.” Another protests: “Give me my veil back!” Both fragments of the same frame depict adult attitudes from the revolution that the children have internalized. One student uses the veil to threaten, while another timidly asks for hers back, perhaps in fear of the consequences that unveiling threatens. The child-like voices continue to question accepted social norms and historical facts about post-revolutionary Iran. Marji cannot register the religious shift in Iranian society, and with childlike irreverence casts the veil aside. Her child-like voice also infuses the innocence of her political critiques, rooting them in humane terms, rather than in self-motivating ones.

Both Dumas and Satrapi write as adults recapturing the evolution of the child's perspective. In tracing the arc from child to adult, both authors must confront the limitations of memory in recalling life-changing moments from the past. Perhaps it is for this reason that they both use humor, satire, and sarcasm to help transport their life stories. The inclusion of various forms of humor allow for each writer to confront the trauma of the past and render it more accessible for themselves and for their readers. Caught between polarizing ideologies, Marji invokes laughter in the frame depicting the schoolyard, attempting to lessen the severity of this historic national moment.

In response to compulsory state-enforced veiling, Satrapi experiences a personal fragmentation. For instance, she follows the earlier frames about veiling with one that depicts her as divided between regular dress and the chador, stating "I really didn't know what to think about the veil, deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde" (*Persepolis* 6). The frame shows a form that at first glance may appear as fragmented and

divided. Yet, because Satrapi is able to recognize her condition in the changing Islamic Republic during the 1980s and because she is able to depict these opposing sides in a unified depiction of herself, she presents to the reader, a frame that is whole in its exploration of identity. In this frame, Satrapi fuses together her two sides, not as polar opposites, but as a singular hybrid



(*Persepolis* 6)

figure that may occupy an alternative space: *the in-between*. Neither fundamentally religious, atheist, nor royalist, Satrapi situates herself in the middle of polarizing politics as a potential

Marxist. In this way, *Persepolis I* emerges as space to renegotiate both personal and cultural history.

The in-between, encapsulates Satrapi's experience as a budding Marxist in a newly theocratic Iran wherein she is expected to veil because of her gender and religious values.²⁷ In the comparison of postcolonial and gendered discourses about laughter, Virginia Richter asserts, "The in-betweenness attributed by Bhabha to the postcolonial subject thus occupies structurally the same position as female laughter in Cixous' theory: it denotes slippage elusiveness, indeterminacy and consequently an undermining of the hierarchies of gender and race, respectively" (Richter 64). The way in which she invokes comedic moments shows not only her internal conflicts between Islam and Marxism, but also the rupture of post-revolutionary Iranian society.

Consistent with her Iranian social critique, Satrapi incorporates irony and wit to convey her disappointment with the societies in which she has lived, confronting the hypocrisy of each. She humorously critiques the changing legal and moral codes of Iran in the opening pages of her memoir. Through her various caricatures, she further mocks the reformists who bring about a cultural revolution. In critiquing the new dress codes of the Islamic Republic, for instance, Satrapi sketches figures of Iranian women and men, who dress differently to convey their political and religious beliefs. If one is a "Fundamentalist woman," then one wears a *chador* (full length veil), and if one is a "Modern Woman," according to Satrapi, "You showed your opposition to the regime by letting a few strands of hair show" (*Persepolis* 75). Similarly, she draws a



(*Persepolis* 75)

parallel version of the men. If one is a “Fundamentalist Man,” then he is pictured with a beard and shirt hanging out, but if one is a “Progressive Man,” then he is shown shaved and with a tucked-in shirt. Satrapi encapsulates this humorous rendering with a mocking conclusion, “Islam is more or less against shaving” (75). Satrapi’s sketches of religious dress seem intentionally reductive and sarcastic in showing her critique of the superficial changes taking over post-revolutionary Iran. She undermines the authority of the veil when she presents overly simplistic diagrams showing the post-revolutionary veiling and dress reform. These images illuminate Iran’s most controversial law regarding public dress, yet the seriousness and validity of the law is challenged through the comedic and satirical nature of the graphic narrative.

This comparison of the reformist and progressive segments of society seems to lampoon other political cartoons from the region. For instance, when compared side by side to Sami



(Caner qtd. in Akman 123)

Caner’s 1976 depiction of traditional and progressive women during the changing politics of post-Attaturk Turkey, it could be argued that Satrapi mocks simplistic social renderings such as Caner’s cartoon (Akman 123).

The difference between the two women is more drastic, since he depicts the traditional Muslim woman as

completely covered in her *hijab*, while representing the

more progressive and Western woman as topless, only wearing underwear in the frame. As Turkish scholar Ayhan Akman puts it, Caner’s depiction of the two women embodies “opposite poles of the binary matrix of identities: modern versus traditional, West versus East, progressive versus backward” (123). The figures in both sketches float in an abstracted cartoon space, wherein they are stripped of personal identities. They are individual figures with no individuality

who are interchangeable for other members from their respective social groups and economic classes. Akman notes this type of abstraction in the Middle East became known as modernist cartoons that bear prototypical representation of a group. I argue that Satrapi invokes this tradition of political cartooning, mocking the strict ideological divisions reconstituting post-revolutionary society. If the progressive woman in Satrapi's cartoon is reminiscent of Caner's Western woman, then without her full *chador*, the Mullahs could as well perceive her as nude. Satrapi critiques the binary, which evaluates modesty on the strictness of traditional Muslim veiling.

In her depictions of veiling, Satrapi discards Western veiling discourses that claim women are static, silent, and unchanging under the veil and avoids reducing Iran's post-revolutionary pitfalls to just a discussion about veiling. The purpose of introducing her text with a discussion about veiling is not to condemn it, but instead, make an intervention into veiling discourses that depict it purely as propaganda. In later frames, the author depicts a fully functioning Marjane, who is veiled while attending school. Throughout the text, the reader witnesses an arch of progression between the first frames depicting a veil that Marji does not understand as a child, to latter images of dissent and punk rebellion in her text, all while she is veiled during her teens. She sarcastically asks if indeed the core of Iranian socio-politics really changed based on the shift in dress code. She undermines this notion, showing that indeed, life continues, even while wearing the veil.

In addition to the veil, Satrapi uses humor to point out the hypocritical moments of the Islamic Revolution and to mock the many reforms disrupting social order. After the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979, the religious fundamentalists made many radical changes, such as the closing of bilingual schools and proclaiming that they were a symbol of

“capitalism” and “decadence” associated with the West (*Persepolis* 4). Many Iranians demonstrated against and resisted the implementation of both the veil and religious fundamentalism, but



(*Persepolis* 4)

the Islamic regime overpowered and continues to overrule the politics of contemporary Iran.

In satirical, illustrative form, Satrapi exposes the irony of the revolution and the hypocritical principles left behind in Iran today through an emphasis on iconography. In school, Marji’s teacher orders the children to tear out all the pictures of the Shah from their textbooks,



(*Persepolis* 44)

but Marji protests, claiming that the teacher had told the children prior to the revolution that the Shah was “chosen by God” (*Persepolis* 44). In what can seem as a subtle justification for the use of illustrative comics to deliver her manifesto, in this frame Satrapi demonstrates the importance of iconography in the changing Iranian state. Image is everything, and the act of discarding a

type of image (a monarchist image in this case) suggests that the Islamic Republic would like to alter national memory through a careful facilitation of semiotics.

In drawing comics and recalling nostalgic memory through the graphic narrative form, Satrapi draws attention to the closely linked connection between suppressed memory and the purging that occurs through seeing/witnessing of images. For instance, when recalling his adolescent fascination with comics, Edward Said has said comics, “seemed to say what couldn’t

otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures ... I felt that comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently" (Said qtd. in Whitlock "Autographics" 967). The act of seeing is just as important as the act of reading in this text, which uses irony to unmask the hypocrisy latent in 1979. Following the textbook incident in the frame above, Satrapi's neighbor tries to represent her birthmark as a revolutionary wound that occurred during the demonstrations against the Shah. The woman's husband remarks, "Look! A bullet almost hit my wife's cheek. Liberty is priceless," in justification for her birthmark (Satrapi 44). The reader/viewer, along with Marjane's parents, are ordered to "look" as the author dramatizes and ironizes past events in illustrative form. The act of looking speaks to the medium of the memoir, which requires the viewer to witness ironic images recalled from Satrapi's past. In her graphic memoir, the author blends humor and illustration to focalize the paradoxical politics behind the revolution. When read in conversation with Dumas's memoir, the text illuminates the reasons for departure as a precursor to Dumas's narrative, which begins after her family moves to the United States.

At the first text's close, Marjane leaves Iran to continue a liberal education in Vienna, Austria, living in self-imposed exile and in-between two cultures during the restructuring of Iran. The second text, *Persepolis 2*, picks up where the first one leaves off, detailing her adventures and assimilation in Europe. What ensues is a double exile, since Marjane experiences alienation both within the homeland and abroad in Vienna. In Austria, Marjane experiences isolation without her family and friends, while becoming a target for racism, bigotry, and discrimination by Austrians fearful of increased immigration and multiculturalism. She experiences feelings of

loneliness, coupled with feelings of guilt for escaping the Iran/Iraq war and for attempting to pass for French to compensate for her difference.

In a series of frames, Satrapi confronts her ethnic identity during the American hostage crisis era while in Europe. Just like Dumas, she struggles with her identity, using racial passing as a potential resolution. In the chapter entitled “The Vegetable,” Satrapi’s depicts young adult Marjane’s body as stretched and strained, filling the distance between her parents who are shadowed darkly behind her and an ambiguous elsewhere. She depicts Marjane with elongated legs spread apart, as if she is involuntarily

moving away from the principles that her parents represent. The more she attempts to assimilate into European culture, the more she becomes displaced in a liminal space. In the text, Satrapi states, “The



(Persepolis 2 39)

harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins...” (Persepolis 2 39). The change in her physical appearance marks a shift from the child-like narrator, whose views are somewhat simple, to the adult persona of her memoir, who begins to understand the complexities of her life in exile.

In this chapter, Satrapi visually disrupts the child-like avatar of Marji with a series of physical changes that take place for Marjane. After developing somewhat disproportionately and involuntarily growing a new beauty mark as part of puberty, young adult Marjane voluntarily cuts her hair short in the punk fashion of the '80s. She compares her changing adolescent body to images of an eggplant and a monster, maintaining her comedic tone throughout the second text in order to contend with embarrassing and difficult moments during her development. In these

frames, Satrapi highlights the importance of the reader's witnessing by expressing her transformation in simplistic black and white terms for viewing. She marks these transitions by depicting herself first as an Incredible Hulk-like figure who transitions to the even more rebellious Marjane that we see for the remainder of the series. With her simplistic drawings, Satrapi highlights the cartoonish aspect of her memoir, suggesting she is mocking herself for perceiving her life as difficult in Vienna (especially in contrast to what Iranians were experiencing in Iran at the time). These visual differences disrupt the child-like image that the reader witnesses in the first memoir, transitioning Marji to Marjane.

Still unsure as to how she can cope with her displacement, Marjane denies her Iranian heritage instead of embracing a hybrid identity made up of an Iranian past and Austrian present. Returning to the opening frame of this chapter, Marjane attempts to pass as French at a party, instead of truthfully stating that she is Iranian. She justifies this by rooting her feelings in the difficulty of being Iranian during the 1980s in the wake of the revolution and the Iran/U.S. hostage crisis. Like Dumas, she copes by attempting to pass for another ethnicity. Yet, Marjane is troubled by her own denial of nationality, remembering her grandmother's advice, "Always keep your dignity and be true to yourself" (*Persepolis 2* 41). Dumas, in comparison, does not present the reader with an authoritative voice of integrity or consciousness, such as Satrapi's grandmother. Rather, Firoozeh's guilt that moves her to reconsider the Firoozeh Jazayeri/Julie Dumas schism.

In contrast to Dumas, Satrapi finally resolves her identity politics in reclaiming her Iranian heritage and casting aside her French mask. In response to gossiping students who are ridiculing Marjane, she shouts, "You are going to shut up or I am going to make you! I am Iranian and Proud of It!" (*Persepolis 2* 43). In this scene, Satrapi uses the advantageous elements

of graphic novels in combining the visual with the textual. The frame, which is divided in half, depicts the students on the left and Marjane on the right, almost evenly divided. For



(*Persepolis* 2 43)

exaggeration, the text which depicts her shouting at her peers is enlarged and bolded for effect. Her head peers from the right side of the frame, enlarged, angry, and with her mouth open, as if she is about to

swallow them whole. The simplicity of the lines suggests that the comics are meant for both viewing and reading as part of the cartoonish aspect of the genre. In proving her point, Marjane becomes enlarged, exaggerated, and dramatic for the visual effect of the graphic memoir.

Though this instance might not be as humorous as others within her memoir series, Satrapi exaggerates the boldness of the moment with the effects of cartooning. She likens herself to a monster, from which the other students are cowering. Perhaps, she is the “identity monster,” resembling her earlier renderings of the Incredible Hulk, who uses rage to set the record straight. Through the series of frames leading up to this image, she pokes fun at herself for attempting to pass as someone other than Iranian and restores order in her life by reclaiming her Iranian identity. Though passing for French initially seems like a viable option to help her cope with the negative images associated with being Iranian, unlike Dumas, she takes a clear stand against this and shows that it is much better for her to claim her Iranianness instead. Her memoir could read more sincere than Dumas’s, since she takes the ultimate stand in reclaiming herself.²⁸

Nevertheless, they are both productive works for evaluating the racial tension of Iranians during the 1980s.

By using images rooted in issues with universal appeal, Satrapi attempts to teach the world about her beloved Iran, in the hopes of countering negative images. This is not uncommon for immigrants outside the nation, who in their adopted countries want to restore the reputation and culture of their homeland (Safran 85). Yet, in so doing, she also uncovers the hypocrisy of a culture that has fragmented and split into two. By using the form of the graphic memoir, Satrapi boosts the popularity of the graphic novel, carrying on the success of *Maus*, which repackages shared cultural traumas in a new and innovative form. Indeed, according to Malek, the graphic memoir has been described as a genre that “transcends national identity, embodying universal values” (Malek 371). The comic genre allows for her to use satire, irony, and humor as a form of catharsis, to work through the atrocities that show racism and bigotry as just as reprehensible as war and torture. Her humor is a way of making the tragedies palatable, to be able to understand them without carrying out damning judgments, as we might encounter when reading other published Iranian memoirs that serve as dooming neo-Orientalist texts.

While it has been mentioned that Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series was primarily aimed at non-Iranians, it made a great impact among Iranians who felt previously unable to talk about the issues in her text. During the International Conference on Iranian Diaspora in April 2000, a participant praised Satrapi’s text as one of “honesty” and “openness,” stating:

It is not part of the Iranian culture to openly illustrate drug usage, sexual encounters, and being homeless. To me this is very important because it allows Iranians to see that it is ok and normal to openly discuss problems we face (especially young adults) and that we don’t have to hide from others because of *Taarof*.²⁹ (Malek 370)

In depicting moments of drug usage, sexual encounters, depressions, and the like, Satrapi often uses humor as a form of coping. For instance, after visiting her friend Kia, who has been paralyzed by war, Satrapi reflects, “We can only feel sorry for ourselves when our misfortunes are still supportable ... once this limit is crossed, the only way to bear the unbearable is to laugh at it” (*Persepolis* 112). It is for this reason that I believe her work is one of the most successful and beloved accounts from an Iranian living and publishing in Euro–American countries. Her work serves as a tie between cultures, generations, and literary forms. Her liminal position as native and foreigner, between Iran, Austria, and France, echoes her memoir’s position between the traditional form of autobiography and the graphic novel.

By using images of the familiar (that is, in Western terms), Satrapi dispels the exotic and Orientalist assumptions about the Iran. For instance, a frame illustrating her living room depicts a couch, TV, the board game Monopoly, which defies the traditionally conceived Iranian living room thought to consist of ornate Persian designs, pillows, rugs, and the game of backgammon (*Persepolis* 2 18). Consequently, the living room disrupts the

stereotypical icons of Iranian culture, revealing the mixed influences of the Pahlavi era, exposing American and European influences in Iran. Moreover, in



(*Persepolis* 2 18)

another frame, when Marjane and her family visit Europe, she depicts them on a flying magic carpet encountering an exotic Flamenco dancer who is set against a backdrop of the leaning Pisa and other notable European buildings, which are all sketched with an Oriental flourish (77). She exoticizes the West, and depicts Iran, the stand-in for the East in the East/West dichotomy,

in real and unexaggerated terms that resist denigration. Unlike other Iranian memoirists writing in the West, Satrapi avoids Orientalizing Iran. This is critical, since she determines the terms in



(Persepolis 77)

which she will serve as the native informant. Using her position as in between cultures to her advantage, she chooses to willingly express the events of the revolution and carve out a space for Iranians in contemporary political discourses. Her text never reaches the heights of hyperbole or present an Orientalist caricature of Iranians. Rather, she attempts to explain what's at stake for Iranians, humanizing them in a post-9/11 world that seeks to demonize Muslims.

Satrapi's refusal to create an Orientalist text is further evidenced in her mixing of styles, appropriation of the genre of graphic novel, and her adaptation to film, which resists overtly performing Persian culture. She avoids vilifying Iran and offers her own version of history, to educate those who might not be familiar with Iranian history and to challenge more widely accepted portrayals of the 1979 Revolution. The effects that both her memoir and her film create are ones that allow us to critically re-engage with the rhetoric of the revolution and face our cultural trauma, whether it is real or in the words of Benedict Anderson, "imagined." Her film by the same moniker is compelling in that it raises questions about the adaptation of a memoir to film. While her memoir is interactive for the reader, allowing the reader to fill in spaces between frames while drawing their own different conclusions, the film, on the other hand, decides for the reader and interprets the frames for the reader.

Nevertheless, both works attempt to thoughtfully explore the effects of revolution and the complexity of immigration without othering Iran. For instance, French composer Olivier Bernet

avoided using explicitly Persian instruments when creating the soundtrack for the 2007 film adaptation. About co-director Vincent Paranaud's advice to him, Bernet said, "Vincent's instructions were clear: no world music, nothing too overtly oriental. He told me: 'Don't pretend you're Peter Gabriel, just do what you do best'" (*Persepolis* film Press Kit). This refusal to exoticize Iran and Iranians as the "Oriental other" resists objectifying and trivializing Iranians, particularly women. Satrapi's memoir and film adaptation attempt to offer an earnest portrayal of coming to terms with a dramatically changing national landscape. Her memoir is successful, because anyone who has experienced any one of the following: civil war, displacement, assimilation, alienation, drug use, homelessness, and/or broken heartedness can relate to her story. Her work does not perform or recreate the Iranian native informant's history for the reader; rather, it reaches out to the reader's sense of humanity.

By creating a work that defies so many categories and boundaries, Satrapi weaves together a story that not only captures a period within her life, but recreates history according to her perspective. Her graphic memoir is not meant to be factual, but instead a retelling of the events of the revolution through her eyes. She reclaims the storytelling power of Scheherazade, declaring that, "we are all storytellers; this is not a reality show" (UCLA Lecture 4-16-08). In an interview with *Time Magazine*, Satrapi states, "Basically, the things that I said are all true ... But it's not a documentary. You always have to arrange things to tell a story. I'm not going to point exactly to where I have changed things. That's my secret" (McLaughlin). Though she embellishes in her text, for the sake of a humorous retelling of her confrontation with traumatic experiences, global audiences and literary critics alike grant her more flexibility in retelling her life story. The reader does not put her story on trial, and this, I believe, is due in part to the openly artistic and interpretative nature of her appropriation of cartooning, and to her critical

look at Iranian and Euro–American politics. Though she embraces the role of native informant, she avoids creating a work of propaganda, which also challenges hegemonic discourses of history. I, therefore, urge readers to remember that this is also a story about Satrapi’s forgotten heroes, who experienced complex political and personal struggles during the upheaval of the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath.

Just as Marjane reclaims the role of the storyteller, so, too, does Dumas in *Funny in Farsi*, who uses the archetypal role of the Sheherazadian storyteller to deliver equally embarrassing and touching anecdotes from her formative years in Orange County, California. To cite Soren Kierkegaard, “The more one suffers, the more I believe, has one a sense for the comic. It is only by the deepest suffering that one acquires true authority in the use of the comic” (qtd. in *Cheeky Fictions* 2). This is certainly the case in both Dumas and Satrapi’s memoir, wherein the authors use humor and cartooning to contain the trauma of the 1979 Revolution, its aftermath, and self-imposed exile from Iran. Throughout many of their textual examples, both authors offer productive moments wherein the reader can confront the difficulty of being forced to flee the homeland. Yet, where Satrapi dares to critique the Islamist regime of Iran, Dumas avoids confronting them. Where Satrapi points out the pitfalls of assimilating to Viennese society, Dumas justifies total immersion into American society. Although Satrapi’s text is cartooned with black and white sketches, ironically, it is Dumas’s memoir that paints a black-and-white picture of being Iranian in America. Through overly idealistic and simplistic reasoning, Dumas’s text, though comedic and playful, risks justifying master narratives of American Empire.

In contrast, Satrapi seems to offer a more complex and colorful perception about what it means to be Iranian in 1980s Europe. Her comic is just as entertaining as it is educational. Just as little Marji reads the comic book form of *Dialectical Materialism* to learn about Marx, so does

Satrapi use the medium to teach and engage her non-Iranian audience about Iran. As displaced Iranian writers in the United States and France, both Dumas and Satrapi have internalized and externalized exile, sacrificing homeland for freedom and economic opportunity elsewhere. For the modern Iranian memoirist, the distance that self-imposed exile affords coupled with the formal structure of humorous narration offer creative freedom to make way for an identity that might be somewhat reinvented on the page. With the inclusion of comedy in the popular genre of memoir, Iranian women writers are able to use humor to mockingly laugh at limiting discourses about their ethnicity and gender. Like ancient Greek actors upon the stage, the use of humor in memoir allows each author to reenact and pull through comedic elements in their autobiographical works to contend with their Iranian identity, not just in the past, but in the present. By reexamining the past through a humorous lens, both writers attempt to use their experiences during and after the 1979 Revolution as a prescription to safeguard against racist attitudes resurging after 9/11.

¹ As I am sure most readers are aware, passing is typically discussed in a Black/White binary and within the context of the United States. I invoke it here to discuss the way in which other ethnic-Americans straddle the lines of racial ambiguity.

² When referring to the autobiographical protagonist in the text, I will use the first name of the author (Firoozeh and Marjane or Marji) to signal the creative aspect of memoir. When referring to the role of the author, I will refer to their last names (Dumas and Satrapi).

³ After surveying the diary texts of three famous writers, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and Violet Hunt, Martinson found that these writers had “carefully constructed [sic] the self on the page,” and given themselves the power to “bare and cloak themselves in diary text” (Martinson 1).

⁴ Women writers undermine accepted social conventions that presume women cannot be funny. As June Sochen points out in *Women's Comic Visions*, there had been a longstanding belief until

the latter half of the twentieth century perpetuated by unchallenged philosophers like Shopenhauer, Bergoson and Freud that women have no sense of humor (Sochen 9). By using humor successfully, women writers are not only able to disprove this gross underestimation, but they are also able to manipulate the conventions of autobiography, which had been primarily male dominated until more recently.

⁵ Though Iranians are technically of Aryan descent, they are not treated as “White” in either America or in Europe, since their affiliation with Islam racializes them with other Muslims, such as Arabs, South Asians, and North Africans, among others. After the 1980s U.S. hostage crisis, and again after 9/11, the association with Islam has rendered the identity of Iranians as ethnically pejorative. As Ali Behdad states in *Forgetful Nation*, “new immigrants are always racialized independently of their race” (xv). For Iranians, in particular, they are simultaneously viewed as the “model minority” and the “threatening alien,” since the American public views them as part of the Islamic state of the Islamic Republic of Iran (ix).

⁶ While many critics and non-Iranian and Iranian readers celebrate *Persepolis*’s universal appeal, as if on cue, the Islamic Republic of Iran banned the series and denounced the film version. The day after the animated feature won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, Medhi Kalhor, the cultural advisor to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, released a statement to the Iranian press demoting the film as “anti-Iranian” and that it attempted to “sabotage Iranian culture” (iafrica.com, quoted in Chute 106). When accepting her award, Satrapi dedicated her prize “to all Iranians,” despite no longer traveling back to Iran “because the rule of law does not exist there” (106). In response, Kalhor continued his criticism, “The Cannes Film Festival, in an unconventional and unsuitable act, has chosen a movie about Iran that has presented an unrealistic picture of the achievements and results of the glorious Islamic Revolution in some of its parts” (*PressTV* 2007).

⁷ Islamophobia, or “anxiety of Islam,” as enacted by non-Muslims and perceived by Muslims, plays a crucial role in heightened tension that pits Christians and Jews against Muslims. Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg assert that many on both sides are convinced of an inevitable civilizational clash (Gottschalk and Greenberg 5). This phenomenon, which can be traced back to European colonialism and imperialism in North Africa and the Middle East, significantly bolsters the popularity of Middle Eastern women’s life writings in the Global North since 9/11. The “misery memoirs,” such as *Mutilated*, *In the Name of Honor*, *Marriage by Force* and *Burned Alive*, offer harrowing stories that essentialize or vilify Muslim culture as backward, oppressive, and violent, even if some aspect of the story rings true. These memoirs are the perfect stages for acting out the propagandistic drama that validates imperial invasion of Muslim countries.

⁸ Though Iranian women are anxious to dispel the same stereotypes lodged at their Muslim and Arab counterparts, rather than take up a pan-Muslim identity, or fight in solidarity with other Muslim writers, many Iranian women memoirists have urgently sought to differentiate themselves from their Arab and/or Muslim counterparts in order to expeditiously distance themselves from perceived negative stereotypes in the so-called West. Many Iranian writers in the Diaspora seek to disassociate themselves from the political rhetoric of the Islamic Republic

of Iran and refer to themselves as Persian instead of Iranian, since Iran has strained relations with most of the countries to which Iranian immigrants and refugees have emigrated. In calling themselves Persians, Iranians living in North America, Europe, or Australia attempt to reclaim the former glory of the Persian Empire and rekindle its magic for Westerners in order to differentiate the culture from the politics of the regime. While at some points, Iranian memoirists attempt to rewrite their experience with Islam, at other junctures, they discard this religious persona altogether.

⁹ The Persian word *tanz* in recent years has been used to denote satire in the European literary tradition, though it literally translates as “mockery.” Additionally, the words *hajv* and *hazl* are two concepts that describe specialized types of satire. *Hajv*, or “lampoon,” is a form of personal satire without intentions toward social reform, while *hazl*, or “comical,” refers to a more humorous type of satire reserved traditionally for humorous poems of a sexual nature. In Persian literature, the use of satire can be traced back more than a millennium, since poets and writers used it to critique emirs and kings to push for socio-political reform.

¹⁰ In light of German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s comments that Turkish immigrants are expected to learn German and to adopt Christian values, this notion of assimilation is at the heart of French and German debates that seek to answer the “Muslim question.” In October 17, 2010, Merkel stated that the “Multikulti” approach in her country has totally failed and warned, “We feel tied to Christian values. Those who don’t accept them don’t have a place here” (as reported by Alan Hall for the *Daily Mail Online*).

¹¹ Dumas’s text follows the spirit of ethnic American humor, which was first documented in the study of Jewish American humor. As a prototype for ethnic jokes, Jewish jokes, either created by the Jews or by those outside of the community, at best aim to explain cultural differences between Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles). According to Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his work, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews*, Jewish humor can reveal “a great *many* truths about the Jews, but no *one* great truth.” For many Jews, jokes combat anti-Semitism or issues of assimilation, as they strive to preserve Jewish identity in America. This sentiment could be the basis for Dumas’s overall use of humor when critiquing characteristics about the Iranian community. Although it is conceded by Telushkin that ethnic jokes do not “arbitrarily target their victims”—as there is a factual basis for the flaws mocked in the joke—according to postcolonial humorists and writers, there is a possibility of achieving social critique without dehumanizing the ethnic subject. This flexibility allows for ethnic comedians to construct jokes about their respective communities that comment on specific types of behavior, in order to recuperate group qualities or reject flaws.

¹² Marjane Satrapi’s popular *Persepolis* series has also used the form of humor as a vehicle for memoir. In her graphic memoir, Satrapi is more overtly critical about post-1979 Iranian society and her new European surroundings. Satrapi uses a darker humor than Dumas to confront her traumatic past in revolutionary Iran and abroad.

¹³ Because I locate Dumas’s works in the context of Iranian women writers in the Diaspora, I invoke Hamid Naficy’s use of the phrases “exile cultural production” and “in-betweenness” to

express the personal and political liminal spaces that exist within the texts. I also point to Amy Malek's work on liminality in "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production," which invokes Naficy's definition as "a process of perpetual becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent, and incorporation into the dominant host society that can be partial or complete" (Naficy quoted in Malek 355).

¹⁴ Many newly immigrated Iranians began using whatever images they could to recuperate and boost the perception of Iranians in the United States. Associations with all things Persian, whether they are cats, rugs, or the ancient empire of Persia, became common among Iranians in the 1980s and are still popular to claim today.

¹⁵ This seems to be just Dumas's way of referring to the "melting pot" or "salad bowl" of America. Each phrase denotes a moment in characterizing diversity in America. Up until the millennium, many used the "melting pot" signifier to suggest that different cultural communities meld and fuse together in a collective, yet singular, identity of being American. No longer prevalent in the wake of diasporic settlements and cultural enclaves, sociologists refer to America as the "salad bowl," since different communities make up the salad/collective, but do not necessarily melt together.

¹⁶ Hyacinth is one of the traditional flowers present on the Persian New Year table spread. Of course, pine stands for a Christmas tree. Their contrast could be seen as Dumas's ways of comparing two important holidays in the Persian and American culture, which are often both celebrated by Iranian Americans.

¹⁷ The Iranian fascination with the Western imaginary fits in very well with pre-revolutionary Iranian writer, Jalal al-e Ahmad's coining of the word "Westoxification" in his text, *Gharbzadegi*, which criticizes an Iranian reliance on and/or imitation of Euro-American cultural, economical, and political practices.

¹⁸ The dialogic split refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's term, "dialogic imagination," which explores the use of humor to ease the tension in two voices that compete for power in the same sentence.

¹⁹ The reference to Rodney King's infamous words is mine and not the author's. By invoking King's phrase, I wish to point out racial tension between Iranians and other Americans during the 1980s and Dumas's often-simplistic plea for ceasefire, which doesn't account for historical or political interactions between Iran and the United States that might warrant hostility.

²⁰ These graphic memoirs are important to consider in terms of how they depict trauma in both testimonial and comic book form.

²¹ In reference to Pascale Casanova's Center/Periphery model for publishing, as explained in *The World Republic of Letters*.

²² In reference to the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

²³ I agree with Malek's appropriation of Homi Bhabha's use of hybrid as "identity that occurs in the space between cultural borders." Rutherford, Jonathan. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha" *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishard, 1990. 207-221.

²⁴ The accepted sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

²⁵ Ardeshir Mohassess was born in Iran in 1938 and because of the political nature of his cartoons during Mohammad Reza Shah's regime, he has been living in self-imposed exile since 1976. Following the 1979 Revolution, he continued to live in the United States and because of a battle with Parkinson's, he has been mostly forgotten until recently when a new book, *Ardeshir Mohassess: Art and Satire in Iran* edited by Shirin Neshat and Nicky Nodjumi, was published in 2008 by the Asia Society. Most of his caricatures, which critique the three succeeding regimes of Iran—the Qajars, the Pahlavis, and the Islamists of the Islamic Republic—are drawn in a surrealist style for social justice, often invoking "ironic and uneasy laughter," as one views the images of the oppressors of the day (Neshat and Nodjumi 15).

²⁶ I don't mean to elide the nuanced changes between presidents governing under the ruling body of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since 1979, there have been waves of progressive and regressive moments under the regime. There was hope for progressive ideals and some change during the former President Khatami's first term, though this hope faded during his second term and was completely forgotten during President Ahmadinejad's two terms. Though Satrapi, along with her Iranian readers, are aware of these shifts in Iranian politics, the author is instead speaking to the more common view that there is an impenetrable unified government since the 1979 installation of the Islamic Regime. Of course, well after the publication of *Persepolis*, the government was temporarily weakened during the 2009 election crisis. Since then, the government has rebounded in strength, and the aims and policies of the theocracy have been more or less the same in depicting an Islamic Republic as a utopia and other "Western" governments as corrupted societies.

²⁷ Though Satrapi writes from a political margin, it must be noted that, as a Marxist, she is intellectually privileged. Her heroes are the Marxist intellectuals, who can often afford to theorize about social restructuring because they are often upper-middle class or upper class. Satrapi is well aware of this, since she mentions in the beginning of her text, she is ashamed that her family drives a Cadillac and has a maid (who also doesn't eat with them) (Satrapi 6). To resolve this, little Marji desires to be a prophet to ameliorate these conditions. As a child, she sees her religious belief and faith as potential resolutions for class issues. It is not until the religious hijacking of the initially Marxist 1979 Revolution and the Islamic Regime's execution of her Marxist uncle, Anoush, that Satrapi begins to loathe the Islamic Regime. By addressing these issues in the first few pages of her memoir, Satrapi signals to her readers that she recognizes the potential hypocrisy of her critiques, as an upper-class intellectual and former religious believer. Consistent with her ideology and disillusionment with faith, she often demonizes fundamentalists, who in part make up the working class. Although she upholds the struggles of the working class as part of a Marxist logic, she still critiques the religious working class, perhaps indicative of her personal disdain for them following the Islamic Revolution.

²⁸ However, it should be noted that in describing her conflict between Firoozeh Jazayeri and Julie Dumas, Dumas opens up discussions about identity for ethnic-Americans.

²⁹ The Persian cultural practice of saving face, or for fighting for the lower hand.

Chapter Three
Mosaics of American Muslims:
Reading Islam Across Mohja Kahf's Poetry and Fiction

In her poem “Hijab Scene #3,” written in 1993, Syrian American poet, Mohja Kahf discusses the perception of veiling in the United States, stating: “Would you like to join the PTA?” she asked/ tapping her clipboard with her pen./ “I would,” I said, but it was no good./ she wasn’t seeing me.../ A regular American mother next to me/ Shrugged and shook her head.../ “Dammit, Jim, I’m a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!”—but the positronic force field of hijab/ jammed all her cosmic coordinates” (*E-mails from Scheherazad* 25). In her poem, Kahf elucidates the negative view of Islamic veiling in America, signaling its perceived opposition to a mainstream, pop-cultural American identity with words like “PTA” and “regular American,” including a sci-fi reference to *Star Trek* via Captain James “Jim” Kirk and the enemy race of the Klingons. Kahf underscores a Muslim woman’s assumed difference from non-Muslim Americans while wearing hijab, oscillating between her invisibility as a participatory member of the PTA and her visibility as a threatening, ethnic “other,” not unlike a Klingon. In this instance, hijab becomes more than just a symbol of religious devotion, but a personified invisible barrier surrounding the wearer. Kahf continues the science fiction imagery, comparing the veil to a “force field” capable of “jamming” and disabling her ability to interact and communicate with others. In witty, free-flowing poetry, Kahf discusses the limitations of the veil in American society, problematizing its stigmatization, before offering solutions for interfaith dialogue in her other poems. This is not the first time that Mohja Kahf personifies the veil and attributes to it transformative powers in her body of work. In fact, this Hijab Scene poem is one of many in her

2003 collection of autobiographical poetry entitled *E-mails from Scheherazade*, creatively arguing for a more nuanced understanding of Muslims in America.

Likewise, in Kahf's first novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), the author draws from her background as a Muslim American and continues to conjure a veiling motif wherein her protagonist, Khadra Shamy, recounts growing up as a Muslim girl in 1970s Indianapolis. Just as the title suggests, Kahf has transformed the image of a dark and burdensome veil, commonly mistaken as the only form of hijab, into a light and brightly colored tangerine scarf. In this coming of age bildungsroman, the protagonist critically engages the racism that surrounds her community of Muslim Americans and how to reconcile what it means to be simultaneously Syrian, Muslim, and American. Khadra's relationship to the veil and the motif of veiling, as it relates to her individuality and sexuality, are thematic strands woven into the fabric of the novel. Kahf fuses discussions of the body, sexuality, veiling, and religious practice to defy stereotypes that Muslim women can't be sexual, religious, and agents of their own lives.

Though *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is marketed as a novel, I argue that the text is a semi-autobiographical fiction in that it is a fictional work incorporating autobiographical markers from the author's life. I also argue that the term "autobiofiction" is nuanced and able to push the narrative boundaries of life-storytelling traditionally associated with autobiography, since the text opens itself up by incorporating fiction. Furthermore, in my survey of autobiographical writing, I believe that all autobiographical writing is fictionalized to some extent and, therefore, these are autobiofictions. In meeting the requirements of an autobiofiction, Kahf's text achieves the following as it: uses a protagonist who is not the self, switches between the first and third person perspectives, finds resolution in the ending, uses smaller truths to arrive at a grand Truth, and lastly, her text disguises the self as mentioned in shifting perspectives, unlike a traditionally

told, first person memoir (Smith and Watson 259). Because she has deviated the plot, setting and characters from her own life, I consider this text as a semi-autobiofiction and I frequently refer to it as an autobiofiction instead of a novel as a reminder of its testimonial potential. According to Steven Salaita, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* reads like a “social document embedded in the genre of fiction,” which speaks to the importance of a genre that fuses autobiographical rhetoric with creative fiction (Salaita *Arab American* 40). By presenting a more comprehensive picture of conditions for Muslims in America, Kahf creates a fictional work that reads more like a testimonial than a novel. Possessing testimonial potential, her novel may serve more as a cultural artifact pointing out social conditions for American Muslims in the hopes of ameliorating them for future generations. Accordingly, the unfixing of form in Kahf’s autobiofiction is significant because the author parallels her decentering of memoir with her detonation of stereotypes about veiling.

It is not surprising, then, that in her works, Kahf often creates a feminist Muslim figure who is strong and assertive: an image that is antithetical to the scores of Muslim women’s autobiographies demonizing Muslim men and victimizing Muslim women. Kahf resists monolithic assumptions about Arab women and attitudes that reject Islam in order to reflect a feminist and progressive sensibility. Her motivation for writing, in fact, stems from her conviction and belief in Islamic values. In an interview with *Intercultural Education*, Kahf states,

In my upbringing, the foremost factor in bringing me to my voice was religion, and the religion of Islam as manifested in my family had a modern, political Islamist orientation. Whether I agree or disagree with that worldview today, I am dismayed that it is being painted as terroristic, not only in Western media, but by secular Arabs, Arab feminists, and others who consider themselves as

“progressive.” These progressives are often extremists themselves, favoring undemocratic secular rule over democracy that gives room to Islamists, whom they see as the apocalypse. (Davis et al. 383)

In particular, she offers her work as an alternative to the works of celebrated MENA¹ feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi, who are more critical of Islamic ideals (Kahf “Interview with Deborah Amos”). In calling for a more progressive practice of feminism, Mernissi and El Saadawi, in Kahf’s view, call for an abandonment of Islamic practices they view as mostly at odds with feminist values. In an interview for *Intercultural Education*, Kahf offers the following critique; El Saadawi and Mernissi “annoyed me, in part because of how much they played to anti-Islam anti-Arab stereotypes. I never felt they spoke for me or to me” (Davis et al. 384). It was not until she matured in her study of feminism that Kahf could appreciate their work for sustaining feminism for the MENA nations. While Mernissi and El Saadawi are among the most popular scholars to be quoted in European and American studies of women and Islam, Kahf is justified in pointing out that they leave a gaping whole in the discussion of rights for practicing Muslim women.

That is why through her fictional and nonfictional endeavors, Kahf fashions various role models for practicing Muslim feminists by creating a space that allows for a contemporary and empowering, but still faithful, adherence to Islam. In order to humanize Muslims in America, Kahf writes against antiquated and recycled images about them, countering widely accepted racist views that they are backward and silent. Not only does she diminish impoverished views about Muslims in America, but she also shines a spotlight on her own culture and religion, aiming to, as she says, “manifest traditions, but critique them too” (384). She specifically writes against what the misery memoirs produced by Middle Eastern authors such as Norma Khouri and

Azar Nafisi, who demonize Islam and the customs of their home countries. Anxiety about Islam manifests in these works, as the writers stereotypically cast Muslim men as violent and oppressive, and Muslim women as silent and oppressed. Kahf asserts that in these narratives, the female Muslim subject is almost always portrayed as a “victim” and “escapee,” incapable of asserting her agency without the assistance of a European or American figure featured prominently in the narrative (qtd. in Gana 1578). Unquestioningly supportive of European or American foreign policy, these works gaze at their Middle Eastern or North African cultures from an adopted Western standpoint, often Orientalizing themselves as “other.”

In response to these sensationalist memoirs, Kahf first appropriates negative images and misperceptions associated with Islam; rejects them, and then refashions them as agents in her poetry and autofiction. For instance, in her repetitive invocation of the veil in her five Hijab Scene poems, Kahf confronts the Orientalist view that veiling is backward. She couples rich imagery with comedy and sarcasm to point out the flaws of American perceptions about Muslims. She frequently uses a stereotype to her advantage: coupling violent imagery with language to create a literary weapon that expresses the power of speech and breaks through metaphorical barriers and silences. By reading the trope of veiling across her poetry and fiction, I argue that Kahf uses the power of language to offer a nuanced understanding of the veil and its relation to women’s bodies. In so doing, the author illuminates the potential power and meaning of veiling in her works, offering up both her poetry and semi-autobiographical novel as counter-narratives to the scores of sensationalist memoirs demonizing the Middle East and Muslims.

Relocations of the Autobiographical ‘I’: Rewriting Self in Prose and Poetry

For many poets, the autobiographical realm often intersects and informs the politics of their poetics. While this may be the case for Mohja Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad*, it must be

acknowledged that the author has openly denied that her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* bears autobiographical similarities to her life. When Richard Drake interviewed Mohja Kahf for the *Arkansas Times* in 2007, Kahf asserts that very little about her novel is autobiographical, stating, “In terms of fact, I did not grow up in Indiana, I had a few years in Indiana. A lot of the things the protagonist does, I don’t do. She has an abortion, gets a divorce, goes back to Syria for almost a year. I didn’t do any of those things” (Drake 1). More recently, in a video released by the Levantine Institute in Los Angeles in 2010, Kahf is recorded as saying, “*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is not an autobiography, it is not based on my life. It is a memoir” (Levantine Center). While the author may not have intended to say “memoir,” in the video, she clearly describes *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* as one. Can this statement merely be a Freudian slip for the author, who often plays with the meanings of words? The author describes the novel as a “coming of age story” in her interview with Drake and, indeed, it reads like a bildungsroman focused on the self-discovery and development of the Muslim Syrian American protagonist, Khadra Shamy. Just as in a novel, the protagonist switches between first- and third-person perspectives in narrating her life story from childhood to adulthood.

Yet, it cannot be denied that the author’s life bears resemblance to the biographical background of the protagonist. Mohja Kahf, who was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1967, moved with her family to the United States in 1971 to escape the Syrian government’s backlash toward those opposed to its politics. She moved to Utah when she was four, then to Indiana until she was in the tenth grade. After that, she moved to New Jersey and completed her Ph.D. at Rutgers University. Not able to travel back to Syria because of her family’s political opposition, and her husband Najib Ghadbian’s active participation in opposition to the Syrian regime, she has spent time in other parts of the Middle East, with a few brief stints in Iraq as a teenager in 1984, Saudi

Arabia as an exchange student in college, and, after moving to Fayetteville, Arkansas, as a professor, she has regularly visited the United Arab Emirates with her husband during the summers (Drake). All of these cities serve as settings in her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and her collection of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazad*. Though *The Girl* is not strictly autobiographical, it certainly “borrowed details from her life” (Kahf “Tangerine Scarf”).

Although the difference between memoir and fiction can rest in the notion that autobiography is typically concerned with the exploration of one’s identity, and fiction is normally concerned with the plot and storyline, Kahf’s semi-autobiographical fiction is more concerned with the development of the protagonist, Khadra, than with the storyline, as it follows the form of a bildungsroman.² The protagonist is not identical to Kahf as she would represent herself in memoir, but, rather, she is a loose reflection of her, as if mirroring the author from a murky pool of water.

In creating her narrative, Kahf broadens the autobiographical voice to include the third-person perspective in addition to the first person, expanding the conception of autobiographical writing as only a first-person narrative. By blending the lines between fiction and nonfiction, Kahf’s inclusion of the third-person perspective makes for a creative reading of nonfictional material. For postcolonial women writers, and ethnic–American women writers in particular, the bildungsroman is often the more likely choice for form, since it historically allowed for self-determining individuals to enter into human rights discourses and engage social issues of the nation-state (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 129). More specifically, writers using the contemporary bildungsroman—whether in fiction or nonfiction or both—use the text as a space to explore the development of the individual while problematizing the norms and histories of their surrounding society.

Just like the fictionalized autobiographical voice of Sarah Nour El-Din in the fictional memoir, *I, the Divine* penned by Rabih Alameddine, Mohja Kahf has also stretches the elasticity of autobiography to play with the limitations of the genre. While their Iranian American counterparts have been rapidly producing memoirs since 2003, Arab American writers have been producing them since 1914, with the work of Ibrahim Ribhany, and they have moved onto fiction during the last decade. Both *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *I, the Divine* (which I discuss in Chapter Four) ape memoir in some way, and Kahf and Alameddine humanize their Arab American subjects in the process. The reader follows the protagonists-cum-memoirists throughout their life stories, as they explain the politics about their tenuous position as Arabs in a post-9/11 America. By creating books that read like testimonials, both authors play with the popular genre of memoir and suggest that, as potential autobiographies, these works have a greater impact on their American audience than novels.

In her published works, Kahf uses her poetry and her autofiction to create a space for a non-threatening, but empowered Muslim woman's voice by drawing from her personal perspective as a Muslim woman in America. Just like Marjane Satrapi and Firoozeh Dumas's use of humor as a vehicle to humanize the oft-portrayed threatening Iranian individual, Kahf uses humor, sarcasm, and satire in her poetry and autofiction to trouble the social exclusion of Arab American Muslims and to restore citizenship to them. Just like Dumas, Kahf uses humor, often "sardonic or even self-deprecating," to lessen the severity of the text's serious themes, such as rape, sexism, displacement, racism, discrimination, and the like (*Salaita Arab American* 33). The author invites her broader American audience to enjoy, using language and tones that are supposedly more appealing to them.³ Yet, her sarcastic tone is reminiscent of Marjane Satrapi's in *Persepolis*, which makes way for serious critiques that point out flaws within American

society, as well as in communities of Muslims, thereby coaxing her American and American Muslim readers to evaluate, and potentially accept, criticisms.

As a Muslim Syrian American woman, Kahf indeed mixes her life experiences into her poetry and semi-autobiofiction to speak about the intersections of feminism, Islamism, and American life from a personal perspective. What is important about Mohja Kahf's voice and perspective is that she is a Muslim and Arab woman writer, balancing the Arab Christian voices that have primarily made up Arab American literature prior to 1967. This first wave of Arab immigrants to the United States triggered the beginning of a more than century-long immigration for Christian Arab writers,⁴ an immigration that had not been matched by Muslim Arab immigrants and refugees until after the 1948 creation of Israel, the Lebanese Civil War raging between the 1960s and 70s, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the 2004 Iraqi invasion (Gana 1574). Their immigration in comparison is much more recent, and the representation of Muslim Arab American writers in ethnic–American literature has exponentially increased during the last decade. Though there are more nuanced differences between the early Christian Arab American writers, they shared a commonality in that, as representatives of Arab countries, Arab American writers attempted to humanize their community by erasing religious, ethnic, and cultural lines (Salaita *Modern Arab* 255).

For Muslim Arab American writers, however, evading religious affiliation was not and is not necessarily the case, especially since they cannot easily neutralize or avoid religious ties with Islam. While Christian Arabs could somewhat align themselves with other Americans of a Christian background, Muslim Arabs immigrating to the United States were doubly scrutinized in terms of their race and religion (and triply in terms of gender, for Muslim Arab American women). Whether they embrace or reject Islam in their works, they usually explain in some way

their connection to the religion for their non-Muslim American readership. It is, therefore, significant that a Muslim Arab American writer such as Mohja Kahf uses Islam and veiling as a running theme throughout her work.

Refusing Invisibility: Recuperating the Veil and Dislocating Muslim Women's Victimhood

In both her poetry and fiction, Mohja Kahf includes a diversity of voices and perspectives to break through the average reader's expectations that all Muslims are the same, part of a homogenous group. In so doing, she consciously serves as a cultural intermediary between Muslims and Christians in America, and attempts to shatter stereotypes about her culture and religion made by those who do not understand. She accomplishes this difficult feat by fusing religious hyperbole and sexual imagery, while recuperating metaphorical violence to assert her agency as a Muslim woman. In the process, she challenges misperceptions that the American public holds about Muslims in the United States. Additionally, the author creates strong female characters who thrive in the liminal spaces between Islam, Arabness, and American values, writing against the scores of texts that victimize Muslims women. Ultimately, she demonstrates that one's identity politics do not have to be complicit with the politics of American empire, and that a productive space can exist for ethnic Americans who may not necessarily agree with government politics.

Contrary to Western feminist and colonialist beliefs, the veil does not suppress women; rather, the confines of a patriarchal society that seeks to reduce the condition of women to either the eradication or implementation of the veil limits the mobility of women. In her essay entitled "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Mohanty critiques representations of the veil as a "unilateral" institution of oppression, questioning the generalizations of the Western feminist perspective that condemns the act of veiling as a "control" over women or a "universal" symbol of

“backwardness” (Mohanty 56). She condemns “Western feminism” and subsequent writings about Third World women for portraying the “average” Third World woman as leading an “essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)” (56). That is, just as colonialist men use(d) a binary equating unveiled women with being educated and modern, and veiled women with being uneducated and backward, Western feminism has also universally reduced veiling discourse to a binary of oppressions and liberations within Muslim communities.

To use a poetic example, Kahf denies attitudes that attribute veiling to backwardness, in her poem “Hijab Scene 7.” In the poem, she employs violent imagery as an inversion of prejudicial views, and she challenges ignorance about Muslims in America, stating:

No, I’m not bald under the scarf

No, I’m not from that country where women can’t drive cars

No, I would not like to defect

I’m already American

But thank you for offering

What else do you need to know

Relevant to my buying insurance,

Opening a bank account,

Reserving a seat on a flight?

Yes, I speak English

Yes, I carry explosives

They’re called words

And if you don't get up

Off your assumptions

They're going to blow you away (Kahf *E-mails* 39)

In this example, Kahf counters American oppression with linguistic aggression. She uses a defensive and emphatic tone to denounce negative stereotypes that many non-Muslims possess about Muslims. She begins the poems with a series of “Noes” in answer to questions unspoken by an invisible interlocutor in the poem, which presumably lump all Muslims together as un-American, backward, and violent Arabs. The repetition of the “Noes” consistently rejects established beliefs that demonize Muslims. In terms of identity, the poetic narrator indicates that she is simultaneously Muslim and American, paving the way for a new hybrid identity that does not need to pit Muslims and Americans against one another.

In contrast to her negations, which reject stereotypes about Islam, Kahf marks the tonal shift in her poem with a series of affirmations and “Yesses,” which speaks to the potential power that Muslim women can assert. For her, language is powerful and able to explode through racial barriers. She recuperates violent imagery as a metaphor to embody the power of her words and to assign agency to those breaking through the silences. She comically plays with words and employs puns to crescendo her growing outrage, using the word “ass” within the word “assumptions” to highlight the absurdity of racial prejudice.

In posing questions to the interlocutor (who is unworthy of corporeal representation in her poem), the poetic “I” asserts her power to speak and challenge the silent speaker. With her question: “What else do you need to know,” the author reflects an independence that would be denied based on one’s ideas about Muslim women. The irony, of course, is that the questions the interlocutor poses deny women the independence within the United States that many women talk

about possessing in the MENA nations. What's more, through the examples of opening up a bank account, buying insurance, or reserving a seat on a flight, Kahf paints the portrait of everyday activities performed everywhere in the world, thereby rendering Muslim Americans as ordinary.

In her poem, Kahf mocks the association with violence that many link with Muslims. In so doing, she captures in poetic form a complex image for many Muslim Arab American women, who are strong, assertive, and simultaneously Muslim and American. In the special-edition *Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* about Arab American literature, Catherine Wagner asserts that Kahf's poetry "riskily uses violence as a figure for a powerful force in American society," which Middle Eastern women use to assert their agency (Wagner 236). In using the word "riskily," Wagner points to the hostility aimed toward Muslims after 9/11, which unequivocally associate Islam with terrorism. Yet, I would not consider Kahf's use of violent imagery as necessarily risky, but assertive and powerful, since she undermines the negative stereotypes so often equated with Middle Easterners. By grafting violent imagery onto a discussion about language, Kahf complicates the homogenous view of the victimized Muslim woman by demonstrating her ability to assert herself and speak. The power of speech is capable of combating racism against Muslims. Just as in her poetic video, which I discuss at the beginning of this chapter, Kahf relies on speech to create a bridge for cross-cultural understanding.

Not only does the author reuse violent imagery in her poetry to empower Muslim women, but she also manipulates two arenas of femininity in her works, which are commonly used by men as the battlegrounds for fighting between non-Muslims and Muslims: the body and the veil. As an extension of the body, I consider Kahf's use of sexual imagery and depiction of sex as an

act of agency in her work, subjects that are rarely detailed so openly by Muslim women writers. The author recuperates sex and sexual agency for women, including religious Muslims, who are typically depicted as being devoid of sexual agency. She creates an innovative mode of expression to carve out a space for Muslim women, restoring sexual agency to them. As mentioned in Chapter One, writers such as Norma Khouri and Souad depict overt sexuality as punishable for Muslim women. Instead, Kahf recuperates sexuality for women, even linking it to faith. For instance, when she had written her column on sex and Islam for the online magazine *Muslim Wakeup!*, Kahf frequently depicted sexually fantasizing and experimenting Muslim women, who as Muslims did, in fact, follow the basic moral codes of Islam that there must not be extra-marital sexual relationships (Noskova 117). She works within an Islamic framework to prove that sexual intimacy between a married man and woman is acceptable to discuss among Muslims.

In her autofiction, the author breaks new ground for Muslim women, negotiating a new space in which sexuality and the female body are reclaimed by women and discussed within an Islamic context. The novel spans thirty years, from the 1970s just up until the millennium. Though the novel takes place in a pre-9/11 world, its relevance today is perhaps why the author published it on September 11, 2006, five years after the attack on the World Trade Center, which heightened tension between Christians (whether American or Arab American) and Arab American Muslims. In the text, Khadra narrates her development from childhood to adulthood, which includes her move to Indiana, her entry and graduation from university, her marriage and divorce to Juma al-Tashkenti, her travels to Syria, and her calling to become a photographer. After aborting her husband's child and divorcing her husband, Khadra travels to Syria, the country of her heritage, and confronts self-made myths about the Islamic purity of her homeland,

because she witnesses political and religious strife even there. Following her trip to Syria in the late 1980s, she travels back to the United States and attempts to not just physically relocate herself, but also attempts to locate the self in terms of her identity. Ultimately, she comes to terms with her religious identity and integrates it with her American surroundings. In the text, she begins to reconcile what it means to be Syrian, Muslim, and American.

What is unexpected by the average reader is Kahf's inclusion of sexual imagery and explicit references to sex, which are made by the Muslim protagonist. After Khadra marries Juma al-Tashkenti, Kahf uses sensual and graphic sexual imagery to depict the intimacy between the newlyweds. Khadra is at once aware of the way in which the two bodies interact. Khadra meditates on the comfort, pleasure, and intimacy in her new life with Juma, remarking:

To lie in the curve of his body watching TV or falling asleep, his arm slung along your hips, making you feel very feminine and tender. At long last, finding the one place where you could soften like that, and not have to be hard and guarded and defensive and worried. And then to do even more interesting and absorbing things in the curve of his body, the bronze and the olive-colored limbs entwined, belly on belly. (222)

The author repeats the motif of the body in this passage, drawing attention to Juma's body as a complement to Khadra's. Khadra lies "in the curve of his body," doing "even more interesting and absorbing things in the curve of his body," as they lie "belly on belly." By using this descriptive and sensuous imagery, Kahf discusses the sex act in positive terms, though not explicitly referencing it in this passage. It is not until the following passage that Kahf graphically describes in more detail the complexity of sexual intercourse.

For Khadra, sex is pleasure filled, which is not commonly associated with Muslim women, though acknowledged in the Quran.⁵ As a devout Muslim, the author depicts the intimacy between the two figures because they are married (falling in line with religious decree). Yet, rarely has a Muslim woman writer discussed sex and desire openly, insisting on its potential as satisfying especially for women. After their initial tryst, Khadra reflects,

It took her twice the work to get where he got with half the effort. It got easier as they got more experienced together.

“I had no idea it was that much work,” Juma said, his hand cupped over her crotch afterward, as she lay breathing hard, her whole heart pounding under his hand.

“Mine is like a—what do you call it, the no-brainer camera? A point-and-shoot.”

(222)

To speak about pleasure so openly is pioneering for an actively practicing Muslim such as Kahf, as she defies expectations or assumptions that a Muslim woman cannot be sexual. Delving deeper into the passage, it also becomes clear that the author breaks through the illusion that sex offers instant gratification to a woman. Rather than exist as a life-changing act, it is one that requires work and mutual cooperation.

For Kahf, the body is a space in which she can stage feminine sexuality, desire, and agency. Rather than present Islamic veiling as a form of hiding the body, Kahf renders the body as a central space for feminine existence. Instead, she draws attention to how veiling enhances the presence of the body and sexuality as part of women’s agency. The normative narrative in Western European and American discourses tend to dictate that dress—especially religious dress hailing from orthodox Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities—seek to control the female subject and her body. This concept perfectly falls in line with Western criticisms, which often

cite scholars such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to justify critiques about clothing originating from supposedly oppressive cultures.⁶ Many second-wave feminists⁷ and white Euro–American feminists (often they are both) have theorized that dress is an apparatus for social control, usually equating veiling with suffocation and unveiling with emancipation. Rightfully so, feminist scholar Christina Ho has dubbed such feminists as “Orientalist feminists,” since many Western feminists have called for the liberation of Muslim women from so-called barbaric regimes (Ho 433).⁸ Kahf, on the other hand, argues in her work the opposite, examining what veiling can achieve for women—not as a religious mandate or social pressure, but as a choice to express one’s faith.

In addition to neo-Orientalist feminists, American ideology stemming from the “War on Terror” rhetoric have become complicit in supporting the notion that Muslim women are in need of liberation. The United States has sustained that Muslim women in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan are incapable of any type of liberation or agency while wearing the veil, and have justified their invasions for the sake of freeing these women. That is precisely why in political speeches, such as those given by President George W. Bush during the period 2001–2003, they are often spoken of as objects in the passive voice, women who are in need of saving. After all, as Laura Bush stated in a speech she delivered in 2003, the “W” in George W. Bush stands for women (Yaqoob 5). We must then consider the following critique: “When George Bush mouths feminist slogans, it is feminism which loses its power” (Viner 2002). It is precisely this type of Orientalism masked as feminism that Kahf fights against in her text. Her representation of veiling restores to women the position of subject, wherein they are able to think, say, and act, rather than exist as mere objects victimized by a vague villain.

In her writing, Kahf responds to a skewed feminism that has been transported to the Middle East through imperial maneuvers. However limiting a notion, the veil is the most striking symbolic marker for Muslims and it is not surprising that it appears as a recurring motif throughout Kahf's poetry and autofiction. Indeed, by tropologically tracing the motif of the veil throughout these two works, it becomes clear that one of their primary purposes is to establish a new Muslim identity, wherein the veil, among other items of Islamic dress, is just an outward expression of faith, and not a pejorative mascot for otherness or foreignness. In her Hijab Scene poems, she writes against the racism and objectification lodged at Muslim women in America, whose oppression is always represented by the supposedly *menacing* veil. Through her first two Hijab Scene poems, Kahf undermines the notion that the veil must exclusively constitute otherness or restrictiveness, as the appearance or clothing of other Americans may also be considered just as confining. In "Hijab Scene #1," she depicts the moment in which two different types of Americans come into contact and evaluate each other,

"You dress strange," said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair
to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom,
his tongue-ring clicking on the "tr" in "strange." (*E-mails* 41)

There is dramatic irony in the poem wherein the boy with the blue hair and tongue rings is oblivious to his own unconventional appearance, which does not represent a mainstream American identity, anyway. Kahf ironizes the teenager's treatment of the Muslim girl who wears the hijab. Similarly, in "Hijab Scene #2," Kahf targets women's clothing in her dialogue between a non-Muslim American woman and a Muslim American woman,

“You people have such restrictive dress for women,”
she said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day. (*E-mails* 41)

In both poems, Kahf demonstrates that American identity is not singular or monolithic in any way, which begs the question: why exclude Muslims from it? As Samaa Abdurraqib notes, both poems “place expressions of Muslim identity in juxtaposition with expressions of American identity” (Abdurraqib 68).

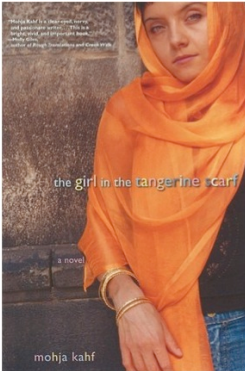
Both poems show the ways in which the representatives of non-Muslim American identity are limited in some way. While the American figures in both perceive the Muslim woman’s hijab as “strange” or “restrictive,” the boy’s tongue ring impairs his speech, while the heels and panty hose hinder the woman’s ability to walk. Furthermore, the “pink-collar” temp pool designates the restrictions that American women face in the work place. In place of white-collar or blue-collar, and as “temps,” women are limited in the hierarchal order of the workplace, perhaps not moving above the glass ceiling. Clearly, Kahf calls attention to how non-American Muslims are oblivious about the notion that their appearance, habits, and lifestyles can seem just as constricting to others as the hijab seems to them. She illustrates that veiling is no different than other modes of dress, and they need only serve as personal expression, rather than cultural markers of confinement. Her critiques against American prejudice and recuperation of veiling are timely since during the late ’90s and early millennium, debates about veiling in public spaces resurfaced in France, Britain, and Germany. While the United States has no official policy about veiling, Islamic veiling is stigmatized in American society, particularly after 9/11.

Kahf’s Hijab poems serve as an effective introduction and precursor to her lengthier meditation on the veil in her autofiction *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. In the semi-

autobiofictional novel, Kahf exposes the politics of veiling in America for more-ignorant readers who might condemn the veil as completely backward at first glance. For the Muslim Syrian American protagonist, Khadra Shamy, the negotiation of Islam in America is at the heart of this bildungsroman. Through the use of the omniscient third-person narrator, Kahf is not limited to narrating her own story, but is able to incorporate the stories of the Muslim Arab Americans of her community and create a Muslim voice that negotiates agency. By using fiction, she is able to delve into sensitive and somewhat-taboo issues surrounding her community, as well as discuss American politics, without having to claim testimonial authenticity that might limit the trajectory of the plot. As with her poetry, Kahf fashions a female voice that questions patriarchal and racist discourses of American culture in addition to her own Muslim community. As Steven Salaita states in *Arab American Literary Fictions*, Kahf does the unspeakable: she “airs dirty laundry” from within in her community (Salaita *Arab American* 41). Yet, she is able to accomplish the improbable: she simultaneously addresses the racism and sexism present in her community while also undermining established misperceptions about Muslims. She demonstrates to her American audience that the Muslim community is just as complex and multilayered as any other community in America. They also possess racist and sexist members, as well as progressive representatives—either way, defying the image that they are a monolithic and cohesive group. Ironically, many Muslims question censorship, injustice, and tyranny as part of the tenets of Islam, just as do many non-Muslim Americans (whom they perceive are vastly different).

In her autofiction, Kahf’s discussions about the veil are particularly crucial, since they do not seek to limit the veil to a monolithic image of imprisonment. She fights against the stereotypical and highly reproduced images of the same veiled Muslim woman who stands in for every other Muslim woman. Starting with an examination of her book cover, it becomes clear

that her work already defies the stereotype of the veiled bestseller. The figure on the cover, though veiled, bears no resemblance to the “misery memoirs” rapidly published after 9/11, which



(Shapiro, *The Girl*)

always depict a veiled woman possessing downcast eyes (see Chapter One for a lengthier discussion). On the cover of sensationalist texts like *Forbidden Love* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the female form on the cover usually wears a black hijab, often tightly drawing it over her mouth as if to symbolize the protagonist/memoirist’s inherent silence as a Muslim woman. Instead, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* depicts a young woman with a loose and brightly colored tangerine scarf, not only to visually perform its title, but also to defy the scores of book covers featuring the black hijab, which to Anglophone readers unequivocally suggests restriction.

Additionally, the gaze of the female *subject* contrasts to the female *objects* of the aforementioned misery memoirs. Rather than droop her head with downcast eyes, as on the cover of so many other Muslim women’s memoirs, the figure stares brilliantly out to the reader in an act of defiance, challenging the very notion of her supposed victimization. She wears jeans and a t-shirt, which peek out from under the scarf, where it is swept away to illuminate an identity politics that suggests she is simultaneously Muslim and American. This book cover is significant because, when viewed side by side with other memoirs and fictions written by Middle Eastern authors, it depicts the veil as a vehicle for agency, adaptable to the twenty-first century. The author does not depict the veil as depressing or restrictive, but as fun and empowering, as the female figure stares defiantly at the reader. Amazingly, Mohja Kahf features an empowered, veiled female on her book cover, despite ultimate control over the final packaging normally reserved for the publisher. As she states in her interview with Drake, “An author typically has

little control over her cover... The bizarre thing is that even when a Muslim woman writer doggedly carves a different shape for her narrative, the publishing industry, with its limited institutional intelligence, will still try to squeeze it into a Victim or Escapee package” (Drake 3–4). Though, it can be said that the author does, indeed, feature a veil on her book cover, which fits into the publishing world’s marketing strategy to signal bestselling tales about the exotic East. Nevertheless, her depiction of a veiled woman creates a more nuanced and updated icon for the contemporary Muslim woman.

Shooting through the Female Photographic Lens: Replacing the Orientalist Male Gaze

Similar to the text’s exterior, in its interior, Kahf disrupts the male perspective and gaze about Muslim women, which seems to be the usual opinion given about the so-called plight of Middle Eastern women. After her newspaper editor asks her to write and photograph an op-ed piece about the Muslim community of her youth, the protagonist, Khadra Shamy, returns to Simonsville, Indiana, to depict the Muslims living there through her own perspective. Khadra’s position as a photographer and journalist is particularly important to the framing of the autofiction. In creating a female Muslim reporter, Kahf provides an alternative representation to the scores of skewed Western perspectives that demonize Islam. The photographic lens through which she captures her community counters the oft-reproduced masculine, non-Muslim gaze that so often objectifies and victimizes Muslim women. The protagonist is, therefore, sensitive to the representation of Muslim women and, like the author, is dedicated to portraying the women of her community as sincerely as possible. As a female Muslim observer, her subjectivity guarantees a more humanistic portrayal of the female Muslim subject, who is most often depicted as object and victim in the Global North.

Khadra is cognizant of the popular perceptions about Muslims and dedicates herself to countering it in her newspaper article. About Khadra, the third-person narrator (who is also Khadra) states, “She cringes at the thought of putting her own community in the spotlight. She doesn’t think she herself can take one more of those shots of masses of Muslim butts up in the air during prayer or the clichéd Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil” (*The Girl* 48). This is the frame of mind that informs Khadra’s representation, requiring both the writing and photographing of this community. The thoughts and emotions are those of Khadra’s, which are expressed in both the first- and third-person perspectives, rendering this text unique from other memoirs. In the third person, Khadra is not only able to share her thoughts and opinions, but can narrate the feelings of others in an expansion of the autobiographical narrative field.

In casting Khadra as a photographer of her own community, Kahf disrupts the simplistic view that the native informant is merely the intermediary between her culture and anthropologists or scientists. Rather, she possesses control over the literary and aesthetic depiction, demonstrating that a usurpation of the, normally male, photographer’s gaze is powerful. Photography becomes a kind of leit-motif throughout the book, restoring visual control to the protagonist and narrator, both of whom are Khadra. Though she becomes a photographer working within institutions controlled by the mainstream media, she exists outside its influences, capable of seeing its hypocrisies and able to offer alternative images for dissemination. She critiques the visual reproduction of imagery that monolithically portrays her Muslim community, such as butts shown in the air during prayer. In fact, this is a timeless image that has been reproduced in Western iconographic representations of the East, ranging from Orientalist paintings, such as Jean-Léone Gérôme’s *Prayer on the Rooftops of Cairo* (1865), to

news stories from mainstream media conglomerates, such as Time Warner, who control many subsidiaries in publishing and broadcast journalism. By granting Khadra the power to control the representation of her community, Kahf undermines the notion that the native informant is merely a go-between.

Similar to Khadra, the author is careful about her representation of Muslims throughout her book, since she is anxious to dispel the widely accepted image that all Muslims are terrorists or backward. In her essay “Poetry is My Home Address,” Kahf states her motivations for writing: “I can’t give my children grand master truths that I no longer believe in, other people’s insistence that this is how the world is. The only thing I know to do is give them my honest voice...Writing is the way I know how to be in the world, although there are other equally worthy ways to communicate and to create beauty and truth” (Kahf, “Poetry”). Both the protagonist and the author are aware of the pejorative images about the Muslim community, choosing to write against them with a more nuanced personal view of Muslim life in America. Khadra must be careful about her representation of Muslims in her newspaper article, just as Kahf must be throughout her autofiction. The text, therefore, is caught up with a series of representations. Aware of Orientalist tropes, Khadra via Kahf is careful to evaluate and undermine each Western stereotype of the average Middle Easterner. Kahf’s politics shine throughout Khadra’s eyes in this semi-autobiographical fiction, wherein both figures explore the positive feelings and spaces that Islam can create.

One antiquated Western representation of Muslims that Kahf undermines throughout her text is that veiling is monolithic and restrictive. At the forefront of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, the author counters popular misperceptions that veiling is oppressive, forced, backward, and static. Discussions about the veil are complex and should avoid depicting the hijab as

singular in expression, since it takes on many forms and significations between practicing Islamic nations. Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed asserts in *Women and Gender in Islam* that, from the colonial perspective, the veil is an instrument intentioned for daily cultural practices, but has since become “impregnated” with multiple meanings signaling the ideas of the colonial nation-state (Ahmed 165). Ahmed attributes the veil’s politicization to the colonialist European context and problematizes the West’s subsequent designation of the veil as a symbol for “feminist struggle.” Especially since 9/11, American political discourse vis-à-vis former President Bush and Laura Bush used the example of women’s rights to convert “backward” Muslim societies into “civilized” Christian communities. It became the justification for the Afghan and Iraqi military campaigns, which sought to supposedly *liberate* Muslim women from Islam and the hijab. It is against this pathology that Kahf fights. In her writing, she aims to dispel the West’s historical reduction of the veil to map out imperialist appropriations of the veil that render Muslims as backward. That is, Kahf speculates that much of the East’s otherness lies in the West’s inferior rendering of Islamic customs regarding women.

To counter negative stereotypes about veiling, Kahf recuperates the veil for her American audience, educating them about what it feels like to veil. Khadra, who grows up with the religious community belonging to the *Dawah* Center (translated as the Prayer Center), “loves being in this forest of women in hijab, their *khimars* and *saris* and *jilbabs* and *thobes* and *depattas* fluttering and sweeping the floor and reaching out to everything. Compact Western clothing doesn’t rustle, or float, or reach out to anything” (*The Girl* 55, author’s emphasis). In this passage, the author uses nature imagery to suggest that veiling is natural and innate. Kahf likens the veiled women to winged creatures, such as “fluttering” birds and butterflies, whose

wings collectively resemble the canopy of the forest. By ascribing a natural quality to the veil, Kahf portrays veiling as something organic, everyday, and inherent.

At the same time, she mentions its transformative power by showing how its wearers become flying creatures who are able to “reach out,” and perhaps nurture, touch, and affect others. Just as in the opening poetic example introducing this chapter, the veil is able to transform its bearer. If in “Hijab Scene 3,” the veil envelopes the subject in a force field, rendering her invisible, in *The Girl*, hijab transforms the wearer into a bird, capable of graceful flight. The image of flight surfaces here and resurfaces in later passages, wherein the veiled women are empowered with their hijabs, capable of metaphorical flight and elevation. It is interesting that the narrator points out that Western clothing is not able to achieve these qualities. Perhaps, ironically, the author recuperates veiling at the expense of Western clothing, just as Euro-Americans deny veiling by upholding their own style of dress. Nevertheless, Kahf uses nature imagery here to suggest that veiling is not necessarily an artificial human creation, but one inherent to Muslim women who veil. This is significant, because Kahf re-educates her readers to consider Islam as empowering women, rather than as confining or limiting them.

Within the text, Islam becomes a central theme, centering the veil as an important motif, which Kahf discusses during Khadra’s journey of self-discovery. She recuperates the veil as positive, protective, and motivating. For instance, when Khadra begins to first veil, she feels as though she has entered a rite of passage. The narrator describes Khadra’s response to veiling,

The sensation of being hijabed was a thrill. Khadra had acquired vestments of a higher order. Hijab was a crown on her head. She went forth lightly and went forth heavily in the world, carrying the weight of a new grace. Even though it went off and on at the door several times a day, hung on a hook marking the

threshold between inner and outer worlds, hijab soon grew to feel as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world she felt naked. (Kahf 113)

To Khadra, the veil is multivalent. She veils because she has reached the age of puberty and it is the Islamic tradition to veil after commencing menses. In addition to the religious requirement of veiling, however, Khadra interprets the hijab as a royal crown placed upon her head. This is not surprising, since during this adolescent phase of her life, she is self-righteous in her religious observance, and behaves as though she rules others on a throne, judging the religious behavior of other less-stringent Muslims. Initially, she critiques those who do not strictly adhere to the dogmatic rules of the faith, leaving little room for religious interpretation. These are ideas about which Khadra later relaxes during her development. Kahf's semi-autobiofictional coming-of-age story develops in tandem with Khadra's relationship to the veil. Khadra begins veiling fervently, later unveiling for a time before returning to the veil. The acts of veiling and unveiling signal a progression and arc, which allows the protagonist to grow alongside her own religious self-discovery.

Additionally, Khadra metaphorizes the weight of the hijab, moving it from the literal to the figurative in the effort to restore a serious and nuanced discussion to the act of veiling. The author via Khadra portrays the veil as a paradox: it is able to "lighten" one with a liberating release from gender discrimination and male sexual lewdness, and yet, the responsibility of veiling becomes "heavy" like a crown, as it represents one's struggle to preserve purity and chastity. Despite this duality, Kahf presents the veil as a vehicle for strength and religious expression for Khadra. The author reinforces its transformative power—posing it as liberating—while at the same time pointing out its responsibility and personal meaning for the wearer and

subject. In so doing, the author strives to move past political significations associated with veiling, especially after 9/11.⁹ Kahf, instead, focuses on what the hijab personally means to religious Muslims. This is also significant, since American imperialist propaganda rallying against many Middle Eastern countries justifies military interventions in part due to the treatment of women and the perception that veiling is not a choice.

Kahf, therefore, suggests that discussions about the veil should be nuanced and complex, not monolithic or singular, which equate veiling with oppression and unveiling with liberation. In the previous passage, Kahf breaks through this binary by blurring the lines between the private and public sectors, which are often considered to be demarcated by the act of veiling. As an Islamic religious marker, the veil is used to protect against a masculine sexual gaze belonging to the external public sphere. A distinction, thus, develops between the representations of the feminine self, who is familiar to those around her, and the more formal self, who must guard against prying eyes.¹⁰ Yet, while the separation between inner and outer worlds usually accompanies rhetoric about veiling (especially with those wishing to denounce it altogether), Kahf shows the veil as becoming absorbed as part of the self and, therefore, integrated in one's lifestyle. There is no more delineation between the two worlds as Khadra celebrates the veil as her "second skin," without which she would not venture into the world. Kahf gives her readers an alternate reading of the veil, one that is positive, despite the countless memoirs and texts denouncing the veil as backward.

The author aptly explores the many significations of the veil, presenting it as a personal act that signifies expression of religious belief, rather than just a political apparatus for a pan-Muslim identity. Moreover, Khadra develops in conjunction with her relationship to the veil. As Salaita notes, she travels a spectrum from the "ultra religious to the disaffected," to which I

would add ethereal, in her spirituality at the conclusion of her text (*Salaita Arab American* 37).

While Kahf presents veiling as transformational for women, it is also a means of defense, evident in her rendering of the veil as an armor or shield. In reference to non-American Muslims gawking at a veiled Khadra, the narrator states,

The stares only ever make her want to pull it on tighter, not take it off the way Seemi keeps suggesting she do after every Middle Eastern crisis dredges up more American hate.

“It’s my connector,” Khadra had tried to explain to Seemi once about wearing the scarf through hard times. “It makes me feel connected to the people in my family, my mosque, where I come from. My heritage.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Seemi had said. “Take the damn thing off; it’s not worth risking your life for.”

But it was the other way around. Seemi didn’t get it. When you’re in danger, you don’t strip off your armor. And she couldn’t get her progressive, but not very tolerant, friend to see that hijab was also more than that for her. It was the outer sign of an inner quality she wants to be reminded of, more often than she could manage to remind herself without it.” (Kahf 424–425)

The reader is able to visualize Khadra’s increasing sense of urgency to protect herself after each Middle Eastern political crisis or event occurs, drawing the veil tightly around her as if to blanket or shield her from American animosity. As Salaita notes, it is able to protect her from the hostility of others, while at the same time reaffirming her values (*Arab American* 34). Khadra explains to her friend, Seemi, that the veil has the power to “connect” her to her people, religion, and community. Seemi, who is also Muslim, urges Khadra to cast the veil aside since she

interprets it as threatening and backward to the more contemporary image of Muslims. Khadra critiques this notion, however, asserting that Seemi is “progressive, but not very tolerant,” demonstrating the conflict that Muslims within the community possess about the religion.

Through veiling, Khadra emphasizes her connection and belonging to the Muslim community, rather than her direct connection to God, as significant of the culturally unifying capability of the veil. The veil, thus acts as a bridge between Khadra and her Muslim community, since she is excluded from the predominantly white Christian society around her. As she says to Seemi, “When you’re in danger, you don’t strip off your armor,” thus, reinforcing the notion that the veil is a self-protective measure. Kahf’s interpretation of the veil is a bold and striking one in the wake of 9/11, when the veil became the signifier for the supposedly oppressed, and yet violent, Muslim people.

While Kahf discusses the merits of veiling in her text, she also presents unveiling as an act necessary to the cycle of veiling and unveiling that contribute to the development of her religious identity. One cannot understand the meaning of one without the other. After her failed marriage to Juma, Khadra returns to a motherland she barely remembers—the nostalgic homeland of her creation, Syria. Shocked that in her homeland, Syrians are not as religious as the Muslims in the United States, she explores their negotiation of religion. In a transformational moment, Khadra experiences unveiling as a religious act, though it is contrary to the strict codes of Islamic conduct. This is a turning point for Khadra, who begins to see religious practice as having multiple interpretations. About Khadra’s self discovery, the narrator states:

The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. She remembered when she’d taken her last swim in the Fallen Timbers pool as a girl. She closed her eyes and let the sun shine through the thin skin of her eyelids,

warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her eyes and she knew deep in the place yaqin that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, alhamdulillah*. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. *Sami allahu liman hamadah*. Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self, developing. She saw her Teta looking at her. Teta got it. Maybe she'd had such a moment in the Ghuta sunshine herself, ages ago; maybe she knew about *kashf*, the unveiling of light. How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom. (Kahf 309)

Her trip to Syria is, therefore, significant, as it allows her a “philosophical or moral closure” (Salaita *Arab American* 38). During this life-changing trip to Syria, Khadra realizes that she desires to become a photographer, and it is perhaps for this reason that the author prefigures this vocational desire in this passage by using the analogy of photo development to describe Khadra’s own development during the pivotal moment of unveiling. The author creates a parallel between light and dark imagery, and unveiling and veiling, respectively. Both are needed to compose Khadra’s sense of self in her journey of discovery. The author uses light to connote a natural illumination of light beaming from the sun and the absence of light in the darkroom, in the metaphorical development of the self.

Just as a photographer uses light to capture an image, darkness is necessary to develop, or unveil, the film. Kahf likens veiling and unveiling to the same cyclical process of using light and dark for the “development of the soul in its darkroom.” She describes Khadra’s soul as an “unmarked sheet” undergoing an “exposure” that creates shadows and “shapes under the fluids.

Fresh film. Her self, developing” (309). The image is significant, because the reader begins to understand the importance of unveiling for the religious protagonist who has been veiling all of her life. Through this imagery, Kahf undermines the notion that all Muslims practice the same way. She defies the expectations that there is a singular Muslim woman—not only among non-Muslims Americans who perceive all Muslims as veiling, but she also breaks through this expectation among more stringent Muslims who deem that a woman can only be Muslim if she veils.

The cyclical notion of veiling and unveiling is further evidenced by the reaction of Teta, Khadra’s great-aunt, who comprehends the significance of her unveiling. Kahf suggests that this occurrence is not singular to Khadra, but has previously occurred for her fore bearers. In order to understand the importance of veiling, one must compare it to the absence of the veil. The author poses the question: how can a Muslim woman understand the importance of veiling if they do not experience unveiling in comparison? Moreover, her depiction of unveiling as a potentially religious act creates an alternative space for practicing Muslim women who do not view veiling as compulsory in their expression of faith.

Because the author uses religious rhetoric to describe Khadra’s experience of unveiling, the author suggests that unveiling can also be religious.¹¹ She rejects an antagonistic dialectic that pits conservative Islamic rhetoric against a more moderate one (*Salaita Arab American* 37). The author suggests that unveiling is not necessarily an unreligious answer to veiling, as many Westerners would consider. In describing the transformational experience of unveiling, the author blends religious words with religious imagery to communicate that unveiling is still part of her religious self-discovery. Khadra knows deep within herself and in the place of *yaqin* (the Islamic and Arabic term for having “certainty or conviction about the truth found in the

essentials of faith”) that veiling as an accepted religious act. In this moment, the protagonist views unveiling as a “blessing” and “gift from God;” it is not *haraam*, or that which is forbidden by Islam. She reverberates this idea in her invocation of her gratitude to God, *Alhamdulillah*, and the much longer “*sami allahu liman hamadah*,” which translates to “Allah hears who praises him” (Anqa 2). This concept not only violates the assumption that Mohja Kahf, who does in fact veil, calls for the veiling of all Muslim women, but it also opens up space for interpretation about Islamic codes of conduct, which consider it forbidden to unveil. The author, instead, advocates the possibility that in unveiling and dressing modestly, Muslim women can still be religious.

Kahf also uses religious rhetoric to restore spiritual meaning and personal signification to the acts of veiling and unveiling, which have been more recently rendered as political. As previously discussed, the act of veiling has taken on a political signification since 9/11 in order to mark shared solidarity with persecuted Muslims around the world. In France, for instance, many women who would not ordinarily protest donned veils made of French flags in demonstration against anti-veiling laws. Since 2001, French laws claiming the practice of *laïcité* or laicism¹² have become more and more strict, until eventually banning the burqa from all public spaces in 2010. Muslim women in France continue to challenge Western authority by wearing the veil in identification with the larger Muslim community, protesting against their forced assimilation. It is not surprising then, that many contemporary French Muslim women use the veil as a vehicle for passage toward modernity and the public sphere, a realm which was previously off-limits to traditional women as a space of agency and individual autonomy (Benhabib 288).

By including the question of veiling and unveiling as part of Khadra’s personal exploration of the self, I argue that the author restores personal choice and spiritual meaning to

the act of veiling, since becoming a political signpost. This notion is most prevalent in her use of the word *kashf*, which signifies discovery and understanding in Islam (Anqa 15). Here, the author resists using monolithic language associated with the veiling/unveiling binary, showing them as equally capable of religious meaning. She reclaims unveiling as a potentially religious act, thus blurring the lines between the Muslim vs. Christian, and Eastern vs. Western dichotomies. If veiling is no longer the single most religious act of Islam, then the Christian West can no longer claim to “save” Muslim women in the Middle East by unveiling them.

To further render veiling and unveiling as a cyclical religious act, Kahf reuses imagery describing veiling to depict unveiling. This parallel structure applies specifically to her depiction of the veil as armor and veiled woman as butterflies. Just as Kahf validates veiling as a transformational act that likens veiled women to butterflies, she reuses butterfly imagery here, but to head off the interpretation that the liberated Muslim woman is akin to the butterfly. In describing Khadra’s unveiling, the narrator states,

Gone was the flutter about her, the flutter and sweep of fabric that was so comforting and familiar. Having waist and legs encircled now, being compactly outlined by clothing that fit to the line of her body—that defined her body, instead of giving it freedom and space like hijab did—was all so new. At first she felt like a butterfly pinned in a glass case, splayed out and exposed. (Kahf 310)

Kahf is careful to illustrate the difference between veiling and unveiling for Khadra, who prefers veiling to unveiling. Khadra feels more exposed and not necessarily emerging gloriously from the cocoon, as she had before when she started veiling. Kahf repeats the word “flutter” in this passage, as well as in the aforementioned passage that depicted the veiled women of Khadra’s

youth to recuperate the veil as beautiful, able to transform women into butterflies. Without it, Khadra is no longer the glorious butterfly, lacking in the ability to take flight. Signaling the ultimate transformation to death, Khadra unveiled is more like the exposed butterfly that is captured and pinned for scientific study. She feels exposed as an unveiled Muslim woman who must actively negotiate the space around her, as she is not wearing a hijab that automatically demarcates the space around her.

In this vein, it is not surprising that Kahf compares the veil to armor, rendering unveiling as the loss of protection. If veiling provides Khadra with an easy and automatic armor against a sexual gaze, then she must work that much harder to deny such a gaze when unveiled. In the autofiction, Kahf pays much attention to the body and the way in which the veil guards it through its suggestion of chastity and denial of the male gaze. She suggests there is religious merit in protecting one's body when unveiled. Khadra notes,

The covered and the uncovered, each mode of being had its moment. She embraced them both. Going out without hijab meant she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behavior, she realized one day, with a jolt. It's in how I act, how I move, what I choose every minute. She had to do it on her own, now, without the jump-start that a jilbab offered. This was a rigorous challenge. Some days she just wanted her old friend hijab standing sentry by her side. (Kahf 312)

It is extraordinary that Khadra should embrace veiling and unveiling equally as a Muslim woman, since the perception is that she must choose one or the other. In this passage, the autobiographical narrative voice resonates, when the narrator, protagonist, and author seem to be the same in diagnosing the situation, "It's in how *I* act, how *I* move, what *I* choose every minute

(emphasis mine). Khadra reclaims the self and places the autobiographical “I” at the center of her thoughts about the veil. Kahf reuses militaristic imagery to describe veiling as a “sentry,” or soldier keeping guard. Returning to her poem, “Hijab Scene 7,” Kahf does not hesitate to recuperate imagery of violence and war to make her points. She anticipates the Western reader’s bias assuming that Islam is a violent religion, and she denies this assumption through her appropriation of violent imagery. Rather than serve on the side of the offensive, the veil is, instead, a defensive device used to protect against the intrusion or voyeurism of those outside of her community.

More importantly, however, Kahf limits the importance of veiling to religious Islamic belief, restoring it from the political. She dismisses the singular perceptions of the Muslim or Western representations of veiling. For Muslim women, she creates a new inhabitable space wherein they can negotiate their own religious practice, either way. To the reader, this is hugely unexpected, considering Mohja Kahf’s own photograph in the “About the Author” biography, in which she is shown wearing a veil. Anyone familiar with Kahf’s personal background, wherein she claims she is a Muslim, Syrian, and American, could anticipate her representing the veil as integral to Islamic worship. Perhaps because the writer is ethnic–American or Muslim in America, she writes in a casual approach to veiling in her autofiction. But since the protagonist experiences her transformational veiling in her Muslim motherland, Kahf denies America’s locale and call for assimilation as a factor for Khadra’s unveiling.

Mohja Kahf, therefore, stages veiling as a performance within her autofiction. She is cognizant of Muslim, Christian, and non-religious American responses to veiling and unveiling. At academic conferences, including the Middle Eastern Studies Association Conference and the Radius of Arab-American Writers, Inc. Conference (an organization that she co-founded and

named), she has been seen veiling one day and unveiling the next. Rather than consider veiling as a mandatory Islamic decree, Kahf suggests that it is a choice, not necessary for one's inner belief, as demonstrated by her own practice. For the protagonist, Khadra, veiling becomes a marker that she can use to communicate her inner beliefs. When returning from Syria, Khadra deliberately veils in time for her arrival to Chicago:

On the plane, she pulled the tangerine silk out of her handbag. Pulled and pulled, and drew the headcovering out longer and longer in her hands like an endless handkerchief from a magician's pocket. Before landing in Chicago, she draped the depatta so it hung from the crown of her head. Not tightly, the way Ebtehaj wore it. Loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover. She wanted them to know at Customs, at the reentry checkpoint, she wanted them to know at O'Hare, that she was coming in under one of the many signs of the heritage. And she wanted her heart to remember, in the dappled ruffle and rustle of veiling and unveiling, *How precious is the heritage!* A treasure fire cannot eat. (Kahf 312)

The author uses romantic language to describe Khadra's attachment to and appreciation for the headscarf. Like the "hand of a lover," the veil caresses her face. Her reasons for veiling when she first returns from Syria suggest that the veil has blended personal and political meaning. It is not only a signifier for her religion, but it is a marker for her heritage in the United States, outwardly defying those who demand that Muslims assimilate to the values of American society. She returns to the U.S. with pride, anxious and excited to show non-American Muslims that she reclaims her heritage, calling it "precious." Salaita points out that the "looseness of her scarf" symbolizes her desire to be dynamic and adaptive (Salaita *Arab American* 37). I would also add

that veiling in this American government-affiliated space suggests that veiling for Khadra is indeed another aspect of identity performance.

In this context, Kahf presents veiling as a site for cultural performance, since the protagonist has been deliberate about when she is veiling and unveiling, and for what reasons. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Kahf admits that in earlier drafts of her novel, she depicted Khadra as taking off the veil entirely, but she realized that, “People would have read it as ‘We won! She is an escaped Muslim woman!’” (Macfarquhar 2). She decided that Khadra should remain veiled, not unlike the author, who in her own life “covers her hair for public appearances, but lets it slip off in restaurants and is less than scrupulous about it on hot days” (2). Veiling for the protagonist and the author counters the popular notion that, in the words of Kahf, Arab women are “dying to uncover” (2). Of course, as a professor of Comparative Literature, Kahf is sensitive to perceptions about Muslims in America, and by employing the bildungsroman, she is able to choose which ending sends the most powerful message in redefining the citizenship of American Muslims.

Veiling at the O’Hare Airport becomes a demonstration of one’s heritage, and this recuperation of veiling after visiting the homeland is not uncommon among Middle Eastern American writers who aim to dispel the East/West binary in their writing. In many memoirs and bildungsromans, the progression of self-discovery in the text is often connected to the author/protagonist’s relationship with their homeland and heritage. It is not surprising, then, that the text should take such a pivotal turn in amplifying Khadra’s voice during and after her trip to Syria. Khadra begins to understand her role in promoting a more-nuanced understanding of the Muslim American community, while at the same time examining its limitations, particularly toward women and black Muslims. Thus, through Khadra, the author challenges accepted

attitudes in the community throughout her book, posing the question: what religious and cultural practices do Muslims in America preserve and to which American customs do they adapt?

Mosaics of American Muslims: Piecing Together Religious Expression in America

Khadra negotiates an identity fragmented between America and Syria, veiling and unveiling, eventually integrating her various identities into a hybrid one. Like Marjane Satrapi, who comes to terms with her inability to exist as only Iranian at the end of her *Persepolis* series, Khadra acknowledges her American citizenship, however, situating herself in a diasporic Muslim community. Like *Persepolis*, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* contemplates citizenship as it relates to her heritage. Like other ethnic–American autobiographical narratives, the protagonist contemplates reconciling her ethnic identity in America, which is why the figure of the more assimilated Muslim in America is fascinating for her. To further blend the imagined boundaries of the so-called Christian West and the Muslim East, Kahf explores the figure of the Muslim American, who has lived in the United States for generations, and who has adapted to and assimilated American values. As a final reconciliation of Muslim and American identities, Khadra considers the identity of the assimilated Mishawaka Muslims. This group of Muslims is from Mishawaka, Indiana, and to Khadra’s family and the strict community of the Dawah Center, they are “lost Muslims.” They are lax in their practice, and, therefore, Muslims who must be either saved by the Dawah, or avoided altogether. As Khadra describes it, “The Shamys had been scandalized by the Mishawaka Muslims...slowly, over generations, they had mixed American things in with real Islam” (103). The Mishawaka Muslims communicate to the reader that there is not just one kind of Muslim, breaking the stereotype that they are a monolithic

group. Additionally, they serve as an example to the Muslim community that there are diverse approaches to practicing faith.

What is significant for Khadra's journey to self-discovery is that this group of Muslims is a mosaic of American, Muslim, and Middle Eastern customs. Khadra focuses on their relaxed appearance and attitude, remarking in astonishment, "None of the women up there wore hijab and none of the men had beards—they didn't even look like Muslims. And they did shocking things in the mosque, like play volleyball with men and women together, *in shorts*. And they had dances for the Muslim boys and girls—dances!" (103). The Mishawaka Muslims are an interesting group for a case study since they seem to be in-between a strict and traditional Muslim society and a more-relaxed Christian America. They are almost fully assimilated into America, unlike other Muslim immigrants, who attempt to recreate their respective homelands in the United States. What immediately strikes Khadra is their denial of Islamic dress: women are not wearing hijab and men are not growing traditional beards. The Mishawaka Muslims are in a precarious position, however. They are neither accepted by the larger Islamic religious community, nor by the predominantly Christian society of Mid-Western America. They are culturally and religiously in-between, neither here nor there.

In resolution of her long struggle with identity, Khadra reconciles that American Muslims can maintain their Islamic practice and integrate some American ones into their daily lives, whether it is playing volleyball together or attending a co-ed, mosque-sponsored dance. The question is not about assimilating into American society, but about which cultural values can be adapted to her lifestyle. Khadra and some of the Dawah community Muslims initially attempt to maintain control over their own identity politics by following a dogmatic practice of Islam. Her parting thoughts in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* focus on the acts of submission and

surrender, etymologically linked to the Arabic word “Islam.” The word, Islam, simultaneously connotes submission and peace, to justify that in surrendering to God and in this case, the world around her, Khadra can more peacefully exist without experiencing daily identity conflicts. It is in her own photographic work, in the reflection of her self-image and the reproduction of her worldview that she finds the “pure surrender” that followers of Islam seek (Kahf 441). With respect to ethnic–American literary discourses, the act of surrendering mirrors the merging of fragmented selves that make up a hybrid identity. Surrender for Kahf/Khadra allows for a fusion, cohesion, and melding of a mutable self that is constantly changing.

In her work, Kahf offers a refreshing and empathetic look at issues that American Muslims face, which oppose the negative stereotypes about Muslim women repeatedly portrayed in the mainstream media. True to the narrative progression in a bildungsroman, the protagonist of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* arrives at a grand truth to cinch the threaded ends of her woven tale. As a semi-autobiofiction, however, this grand truth is reflective about the self, offering a prescription for other Muslims suffering in America. As a potential testimonial, Kahf’s work empathetically communicates the social conditions for Muslim Arab Americans from the 1970s through the 1990s to her readers. Mohja Kahf presents binaries and stereotypes about Muslims in America, first confronting them, and then deconstructing them to dispel the monolithic image associated with Muslims. Likewise, she decenters the genre of memoir, demonstrating its flexibility and creativity in breaking new ground for discourse about Muslim American women. She creates a semi-autobiographical fiction, fusing together fictional perspectives to create a coming-of-age story from Khadra’s perspective as a Syrian American Muslim. Likewise, Rabih Alameddine (who I discuss in Chapter Four) pens a fictional autobiography told as a coming-of-age story by his fictional protagonist, Sarah Nour El-Din. By

creating a fictional memoir told in a series of first-chapters, he stretches the elasticity of autobiographical writing to push through the limits of memory and writing. The structure of *I, the Divine*, which transitions between first, second and third person perspectives, allows the autobiographical subject to experiment with various forms of writing to demonstrate the difficulty of life writing. Ranging from a traditionally told confessional, to a bildungsroman like *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, to a narrative about family, Alameddine's *I, the Divine* opens up discussions about the interplay between autobiographical form and memory, focusing on the process of writing, rather than its outcome.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf parallels her fusion of fiction and nonfiction with her complication of accepted misperceptions of Muslim women to create an innovative semi-autobiofiction. Through both her creative prose and poetry, the author breaks with conventional autobiographical form, just as she breaks away from homogenous and monolithic images about Muslim women. Exploring the trope of the veil throughout her poetry and autobiofiction, Kahf centers many discussions about Islam on Muslim women's sexuality, the veil and the body. She not only addresses American audiences about their misconceptions about Muslim women, but she also forges a more-flexible religious identity for Muslim American women.

By creating strong Muslim heroines within her work, Kahf refuses the invisibility so often associated with Muslim women. Her first book of poems takes a bold and refreshing look at aspects of Muslim culture that seems antithetical to American perceptions, and even to Muslim teachings. In her autobiofiction, she infuses feminism and sexuality with issues of race and religion to further highlight the complexity of the contemporary Muslim woman in America. Moreover, she dispels American perceptions about Muslim women as a homogenous and

victimized group, through her own represented persona. She is a Muslim woman who is simultaneously assertive, sexual, religious, and a feminist. By presenting diverse accounts of Arab American Muslim women in her work, Kahf attempts to create a language that can contain her nuanced representation. As a native informant, critic and storyteller, she communicates the complex politics that comprise the various identities of American Muslims to her readers. As mentioned before, Salaita notes that Kahf has aired the “dirty laundry” of her community, but I would argue it is much more than that. She *educates* her readers by creating a sincere work, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, which speaks on a human level, potentially relating to other ethnic Americans.

Drawing on her own desire to break through limiting character categorizations, Kahf notes, “When I feel I’m starting to get ‘typed’ as a sexual author, say, I might deliberately put out a religious piece. To remind readers not to let any one ‘spin’ take the place of careful reading and independent thinking. In the end, I’m counting on the intelligence of readers who appreciate that our world is marvelously complex” (Drake 4). As a professor of Comparative Literature, Mohja Kahf relies on the power of words and close reading to deliver her message of cross-cultural understanding. She is an innovative writer who defies stereotyping by using ethnicity, citizenship, religion, and gender to challenge Euro–American misperceptions and Orientalist attitudes that monolithically depict Muslim women. By incorporating the self within her work, she crafts an inspiring semi-autobiofiction that has the power to transcend the fictional world, rooting itself in the real possibility of change for Arabs and Muslims living in the United States after 9/11.

¹ The countries from the Middle East and North Africa, which are grouped together as the MENA nations. I am using this designation instead of the broader “Arab World,” which inaccurately characterizes all North Africans and Middle Easterners as Arabs, despite ethnic groups, such as Kurds, Berbers, Assyrians, and even Egyptians, who do not consider themselves as “Arab.”

² When evaluating Kahf’s text as either a memoir or novel, one must consider that in memoir, the protagonist is the memoirist, who speaks in the first-person voice. In novels, there is often a shift between first- and third-person voices, with emphasis on the third person, while in memoir, the author may not necessarily resolve the story and is often more comfortable in disclosing details about the self.

³ Granted, some critics have found that American audiences (particularly whites) enjoy being excoriated, as that pacifies “white guilt.”

⁴ Of course, the absence of Arab Muslim voices in early Arab American literature must be attributed to the fact that the first wave of Maronite Arabs immigrating to the United States began long before the Muslims, in the late nineteenth century. The Maronite Lebanese writer Ameen Rihani was the first Arab American to publish a collection of poetry, *Myrtle and Myrrh*, and a play, *Wajdah* (1909), in English (Hassan 245). Shortly afterward, in 1918, Khalil Gibran (also a Maronite) published *The Madman* (Hassan 245). Both writers attempted to mediate between Americans and the Arab world, even if Rihani confronted Orientalism, while Gibran merely avoided it. Nevertheless, if European Orientalist scholars at the time inserted themselves between the Orient and their Western countries, then Arab American writers tried to usurp that role to better interpret the Orient for Westerners than for European Orientalists (250).

⁵ In reference to female sexuality, the difference between Christianity and Islam lies in the fact that Christians associate sexual desire with good and evil, while Islam considers it as fulfilling a Muslim order when used within the sanctity of marriage (Mernissi 27). I am not so concerned with philosophical discussions about Islam’s view of female sexuality, but am more interested in the representation of Muslim women’s sexuality and its perception by the average American reader.

⁶ For example, following Michel Foucault’s writings on the body in the 1970s, many studies asserted that the body was governed by political systems, which insisted on managing the body in social interaction as an apparatus of its control (Arthur 2). To quote Bourdieu, “the social determinations attached to a determinate position in the social space tend, through relationship to one’s own body, to shape the dispositions constituting social identity” (Bourdieu 71). For Bourdieu, the body can be influenced by the social forces around it. With respect to dress, the body is especially vulnerable to the choice in dress, as the meanings given to alternative styles of clothing are determinant of social, cultural, and religious significations linking fashion to other social fields (Arthur 2). But many non-Muslim scholars are using this theory to cite injustices against veiling Muslim women. It is not their choice that they are veiling, but a consequence of their socially constructed sphere. This ideology is not only ignorant but is also inaccurate,

denying gender-neutral spaces that some veiling societies have created in the workplace and education.

⁷ Second Wave Feminism, though useful in its time, is limiting when applied to the issues that “Third World” women and women of color face within their own cultural contexts. Some activists, particularly those from a colonized consciousness, incorrectly apply the spirit of the second wave to argue for the emancipation of Muslim women in their home countries, focusing on issues like veiling in a Western vacuum (See Uma Narayan’s “Contesting Cultures” for a lengthier discussion.)

⁸ To evidence this integration of feminist language into Orientalist rhetoric, consider the Lipstick Liberation campaign discussed in Chapter One.

⁹ After 9/11, a resurgence of young women began veiling, even if they had not veiled before, to signal solidarity with other Muslims, especially those who do not believe in terrorism.

¹⁰ In Islam, the familiar female self is known only to men who are of her family, or to other women. The formal female self veils in order to deny the sexual objectification by men, while attempting to present a gender-neutral self in society. Yet, in the United States, particularly following 9/11, the veil has become a marker for difference. It can take on a political signification, aligning with the Muslim politics of the homeland, while at the same time rejecting complete American assimilation and integration.

¹¹ In discussions about veiling and unveiling, Fatima Mernissi points out that to counter the influences of American and European imperial campaigns, veiling has become political, as a symbol for solidarity, social activism, and defiance. Likewise, with the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism, Muslim women who unveil also assert their political agency in re-determining Islam for themselves. While there is a valley of debates between these two ideological peaks, I am focused on the narrative instances wherein Khadra views unveiling as a religious act as much as is veiling.

¹² The practice of laicism calls for the removal of religious or political iconography from all public French spaces, including schools and the workplace. Etienne Balibar has argued that this is a “Catholaicite,” allowing for a comfortable worship of the Catholic faith in the French state, while discriminating against Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs, who require additional religious clothing as part of their faith.

Chapter Four

Dislocations of Self: Unfixing Identity in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*

“And that is all vision is: revisions coming at us at the speed of light. Writing presents to us the nullity of ourselves, the inaccuracies of our conceptions of selfhood. We are both nothing and everything - provisional, shifting, molten” – Lynn Emanuel (67)

In an interview following the conclusion of the paperback edition of the fictional autobiography, *I, the Divine*, the author, Lebanese American writer Rabih Alameddine states, “By definition any writer of fiction uses his or her own life as material. I mean, the story is a product of the writer’s mind” (Alameddine 313). With *I, the Divine*, the author presents a potential autofiction in the fictional autobiography of Lebanese American writer and artist Sarah Nour El-Din through a series of first chapters, written mostly in English and sometimes in French. The text is told from varying perspectives to narrate Sarah’s immigration from Lebanon to the United States, her relationship to her family, and her negotiation of life in-between two distinct cultural identities. Mirroring his own life history at times, Alameddine compares his protagonist to himself, stating, “Sarah plays soccer, paints, because there are things that interest me, as well as these are things that seemed appropriate for her” (313). By creating this complex character, involving a gender reversal, the author presents a vessel for the reader to explore questions of immigration, alienation, and annihilation with respect to kinship relationships between the self and family. Yet, unlike the narrative arc of many bildungsromans, like *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, or the finished quality of human rights memoirs, *I, the Divine* is a postmodern fictional autobiography, whose literary fabric is exposed at the seams. It is a work in progress; “provisional” and “shifting,” as poet Lynn Emanuel points out about life writing (Emanuel 67). Indeed, *I, the Divine* is neither the finished life story of Rabih Alameddine, the author, nor his protagonist, Sarah. Rather, it is a metanarrative commentary on working through

life experiences while crafting a memoir. This fictional autobiography is, therefore, as much about the difficult process of recounting, retelling, and recording one's autobiographical narrative as it is about the finished result.

To examine the multilayered work, *I, the Divine*, one might invoke the notion of *pentimento*, the process of aging in a painting that begins to show the layered reworking of the artist's endeavors. This notion is immortalized in American playwright Lillian Hellman's memoir of the same name. In the opening lines of *Pentimento*, Hellman states this phenomenon is "called *pentimento* because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again." She invokes *pentimento* as a methodology for self-reflection, stating, "That is all I mean about the people in this book. The paint has aged now and I wanted to see what was there for me once, what is there for me now" (Hellman, *Pentimento* 3). This haunting notion seems to drive the narrative forward in *I, the Divine*, wherein the autobiographical narrator, Sarah, attempts to make sense of her life through an evaluation of past experiences, and interactions with friends and family. Peeling back the layers of her life experiences in the repetitious invocation of "Chapter One," each passing chapter reflects a new dimension of her story. Though this creative endeavor begins as a potential coming-of-age story focused on the singular "I," it concludes as a narrative about family and transitions to the collective "we." As a literary example of *pentimento*, *I, the Divine* emerges as a narrative about family, rather than a narrative about the individual, since Sarah shifts her focus from the singular to the collective.

By fictionalizing memoir and by including diverse genres of autobiographical writing in the text, Alameddine creates an innovative work that speaks to creative non-fictional texts, such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Though *I,*

the Divine takes place in a pre-9/11 era, written two years before the Middle Eastern women's memoir boom, and published just one month after 9/11, it manages to engage the issues resurfacing after the event's aftermath, namely hostility against Muslims and Middle Eastern Americans. The themes of the text speak to anti-Arab sentiments that had been brewing in America since the Oklahoma City bombings, which had unjustly rekindled negative stereotypes against Middle Eastern Americans.

What is most striking about this fictional autobiography is its narrative framing, which refuses to limit itself to one genre, perspective, or character. Alameddine plays with form to show how memory works, as it shifts, changes and revises the past. By creating a fictional, nonlinear storyline that picks up and leaves off at different points in Sarah's life story, and by moving through the genres of memoir, novel, and epistolary, the author complicates the reader's anticipation of a straightforward and traditionally-written memoir, so often expected from Middle Eastern female memoirists. This is significant because the author actively writes against established stereotypes embedded in sensationalized human rights narratives and testimonials typically told from the perspective of the marginalized native informant. Often, these narratives move from East to West, depicting the author's escape from her native Muslim homeland and relocation to the United States or Europe. By experimenting with form in this fictional autobiography, Alameddine, like Mohja Kahf in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, decenters autobiographical form. Both authors create innovative renditions of autobiographical writing to expand discussions about Middle Eastern women in America. By presenting Sarah's memoir as unfinished and provisional, Alameddine dispels the notion that autobiographical writers should seem as finished as their resultant works. Rather, the fragmented nature of the memoir mirrors Sarah's fragmented life.

If, within the genre of autobiography, the act of writing identity locates and fixes the self, then Alameddine dislocates identity by unwriting¹ and unfixing the self. He creates the fictional self-representation of Sarah, who constantly revises and changes the way in which she views herself in her many attempts to tell her story. The work becomes a provisional one that scoffs at the scores of traditionally told memoirs, like the honor-killing memoir hoaxes *Forbidden Love* by Norma Khouri and *Burned Alive* by Souad, which fueled the Middle Eastern women's memoir boom in 2003. These hoaxes, produced just after 9/11, portray the narrated "I" of the Third World Muslim woman writer as either victimized and/or rescued. As part of a revival of Orientalism, the success of these memoirs depends on making direct linkages between the victimization of the Muslim author and the harrowing autobiographical tale.

In penning a fictional memoir from the perspective of an invented autobiographical subject, Alameddine creates a series of frames that distance the author and the protagonist from the narrative. He critiques the staging of testimonials, disrupts autobiographical narrative convention, and dislocates the victimized Middle Eastern woman. Unlike memoirs that epitomize the plight of the abject Muslim woman in the genre of sensationalized misery memoir, Alameddine fashions a text that depicts a strong female character working through traumatic events: ranging from the Lebanese Civil War to her own rape to heartbreak. Rather than blame Muslim, Druze, or Middle Eastern men for these events (as Norma Khouri and Souad do), Sarah reassesses and refocuses her attention on developing her individual identity apart from the traumatic events. When considering how substantive the Lebanese Civil War is for contemporary Lebanese history, it is surprising that the memoir discusses it in only a few pages. Likewise, Sarah's rape is discussed in only a nine-page chapter; it is by no means a central focus of her narrative. Unlike the aforementioned misery memoirs, *I, the Divine* does not focus on any of the

events as debilitating, particularly sexual ones. Rather, Alameddine underscores Sarah's struggle with the process of producing life writing, troubling grand conclusions neatly packaged in testimonials for readers.

If the subjects of the initially best-selling honor-killing memoirs depend on depicting a Middle Eastern woman as a flat, one-dimensional victim, Alameddine's fictional autobiography relies on portraying Sarah as a complicated, multi-dimensional heroine, albeit one who is flawed. In the opening of a chapter, which attempts to retell the story of her failed relationship with David Troubridge, her gay ex-boyfriend, Sarah asserts, "I want to tell you my story, not to show how I was hurt, though I was. I simply want someone to note what happened, so that my love affair, four years of my life, is not relegated to some garbage heap. I don't want you to think of me as a victim. I'm not" (115). The pursuit of her autobiographical writing becomes clear: to record and reconcile her past. Sarah works through her memories in order to see what transpired, and what remains for her now in order to determine how to move past traumatic events. Just as with *pentimento*, Sarah visits and revisits moments from her past to determine her identity. But through the un-therapeutic process of writing her memoir, she finds no conclusion in either finishing her memoir or resolving her many identity conflicts. The disjoint form of the text mirrors the very difficulty of writing about the self, denying the notion that autobiographical writing is cathartic.

"The Elements of Style:" A Study of Form

Traditionally, in writing a memoir, an autobiographer constructs a linear narrative about the journey of self-discovery. Yet, what Alameddine draws attention to is the difficulty of writing life narrative, since Sarah attempts to write and rewrite her memoir from different points

from her life. When Sarah attempts to present her life story, she delivers it in bits and piece, spreading it across different chapters, never moving past Chapter One. With such a fragmented narrative structure, the reader witnesses the difficulty of narrating one's own life story, as it depends on the acts of remembering and retelling. What ensues is a blurred vision of the protagonist, denying the reader a visual and literary view of the autobiographical subject.

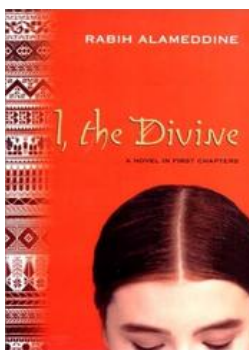
The cover of the paperback edition of *I, the Divine* demonstrates the muted visibility of the protagonist, depicting a blurry and obscured woman, presumably Sarah, who embraces herself. Unlike the cover of other Middle Eastern women's memoirs, such as those discussed in the first chapter of this study, the cover of *I, the Divine* does not depict

an exotically made-up veiled woman to signify a Middle Eastern woman's corpus (both her body and literary collection). The frame crops her form, depicting her from the bridge of her nose to the bottom of her crossed arms, suggesting that what the reader witnesses is just a fragmented view of the protagonist. This image visually cues the



(Kamil Vojar, 2002)

memoir's introspective look at Sarah's fragmented identity. The image of the first-edition hardcover speaks more to the stereotypical rendering of Middle Eastern women. Though the female on the cover is not veiled, she lowers her gaze, as is often the depiction of Middle Eastern



(Brook Koven, 2001)

women. What's more, the strip of tribal print adorning the length of the book's spine is ethnically performative of Middle Eastern tapestries. Nevertheless, the hardback edition's cover also crops the form of the presumed autobiographical narrator, to actively signal her fragmentation. The image spans just the top of the female form's head to the upper bridge of her nose. Perhaps, if the images from the two covers were

combined, then a composite sketch of the protagonist might be visible. But that would defeat the purpose. In the process of transmitting Sarah's identity to her readers, Alameddine uses the first-chapters framing to suggest that the trope of fragmentation lies at the heart of her unfinished memoir, signaling this notion through the visual fragmentation of form.

The formal fragmentation of the text is not dissimilar to the fragmentation of identity that Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi expresses in *Persepolis*. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi mirrors her autobiographical avatar's fragmentation with images that frequently depict a divided self, visualized by the black and white shading of the subject's form. The form of the text imitates the autobiography's meaning. Similarly, in *I, the Divine*, Alameddine frames the text so that the subject, Sarah, uses the modality of autobiographical writing to come to terms with both her Lebanese and American identities. She seeks to unify a fragmented identity torn between a civil war, whose brutality mirrors her own rape. The inability to fully reconcile her identities by the text's conclusion is mimed by the form of the text, which anachronistically begins and ends out of sequence in the middle of her life stories.

The way in which the author experiments with the narrative structure reflects the varying characters Sarah has played during the course of her life. She has been a Sheherazadian storyteller and writer; a satirical artist by the name of Bahba Blakshi, a living homage to her namesake, actress Sarah Bernhardt; an engineer; an abandoned daughter; an abandoning mother; a professional divorcée; a Lebanese girl; and an American woman. Just as Sarah assumes these various labels throughout her life, she plays around with the titles of her chapters. Some of the titles of her first chapters vary: "Beginnings," "half and half," "Chapter One: The Beginning," "Premier Chapitre: Le commencement,"² "Introduction," and "A Novel." Slipping between French and English, and the first, second and the third-person perspectives, Sarah creates a text

that leaves room for interpretation of the self. The diverse chapter titles, which focus on the beginning of her story, a work in progress, hint at the unfinished quality of both the work and the subject. The chapter titles suggest a series of commencements that serve as the starting point for Sarah's story. The range in genre—from memoir, to play, to novel—show the mutability of both the self and the form of the story. The autobiographical “I” presented through these frames is adjustable, revisable, and unfixable. Sarah is dislocated through the blending of fictional and nonfictional forms of storytelling, impacting the way in which she is able to narrate her story.

The chapters in the narrative are at times reverberations of each other, and at other times, entirely new. The cyclical form of the first-chapters narrative in *I, the Divine* is not unlike the repetitive self-depictions in *Persepolis*, whereby Marjane Satrapi represents her autobiographical avatar in a series of mirrors, mirror stages, and replications that reflect her image. In her graphic memoir, Satrapi restages and records the self for her audience, whether it is in artistic or textual form. Similarly, in *I, the Divine*, each “Chapter One” is a mirror of itself, or at times, an obscure reflection of another chapter from Sarah's life, showing the protagonist's difficulty in working through memory. The instances of repetitions in the text are not as important as the general use of repetition in the work, which allows the narrating autobiographical subject to encounter new truths after confronting the same memory from varying perspectives.

Since almost every chapter begins as “Chapter One,” the writer, whether it is Alameddine or Sarah, signals a potential starting point for the memoir that Sarah struggles to write. For instance, in the opening chapter, Sarah writes, “At the age of thirteen, the age of discovery, I was moved from an all-girl Catholic school to a boys' school” (Alameddine 4). She repeats the same invocation at the beginning of her second chapter, also entitled “Chapter One.” Beginning her memoir in the fashion of a bildungsroman, Sarah commences with a story of her childhood,

likening puberty to “the age of discovery.” Her move to a French Catholic school, where she is the only girl, has a seminal effect on her development, causing her to befriend boys more often than girls. She repeats this phrase in the first few chapters of her memoir, demonstrating her attempt to work through her memory of this formative experience. She remembers she was thirteen at the time that she was sent to a boy’s school. In this most basic memory, the autobiographical subject is recalled to anchor the memory of having attended school.

Because Sarah makes many attempts to write her memoir, the rewritings and reformulations of her past defy the chronology, order, and linear storytelling so often characteristic of the confessional memoir. The disjoint form establishes a framing technique that allows the author to slip in and out of the conventional narration of the first-person voice, without ever losing Sarah’s subjectivity. But more importantly, this technique offers Sarah a more elastic retelling of her life story, one that resists providing resolutions to the reader. It prolongs the metaphorical death of the narrative and the autobiographical subject, since the text does not have a clear beginning or end. What it ultimately creates is a meta-narrative referencing itself in an endless cycle.

Because the chapters of her text position the autobiographical narrator as storyteller, the author invokes Scheherazade’s style of narration so popular among Middle Eastern women writers and scholars. Though, Alameddine complicates this notion, since some of the unfinished chapters do not necessarily climax or resolve themselves. It is a more contemporary rendering of Scheherazade, not unlike Mohja Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad*, in which Scheherazade returns to the new millennium after divorcing King Shahriyar to tell stories and teach writing workshops. In *I, the Divine*, Alameddine invokes the characteristics of Scheherazade, wherein Sarah discovers a new truth about herself after retelling her life story and the people in it. Yet,

because the stories are often unfinished, Alameddine postpones his character's climax. Just as Scheherazade must keep King Shahriyar suspended throughout the night with unresolved stories to postpone her death, Sarah also delays her narrative's termination with the same suspension of time in her first-chapters retelling.

The cyclical act of telling and retelling (through the voices of both Sarah and Alameddine creates) a narrative echo, a frame within a frame. The text is a meta-diegetic narrative, which depends as much on the reader as it does on the speaker. Just as in *A Thousand and One Nights*, wherein the tales are duplicates reinforcing the central story that transpires between Scheherazade and King Shahriyar, the chapters in *I, the Divine* are replications of one another. To quote Jorge Luis Borges's analysis of *A Thousand and One Nights* from his text *Labyrinths*, the author asserts, the "fantastic tales duplicates and reduplicates to the point of vertigo" (Borges 195). According to Borges, in the case of the tale told on the Six Hundred and Second Night, entitled "The King's Son and the Ifrit's Mistress,"³ the king hears his own story, integrated with Scheherazade's other truncated stories in an "infinite and circular" way (195). The cyclical aspect of the story within a story, particularly one that reveals truth about the king, spotlights the reader more significantly than it does the storyteller. Borges asserts that if King Shahriyar is rendered a listener like the reader, then the reader and listener are potentially fictitious spectators together (196). Likewise, the reader of *I, the Divine* is aware that Sarah struggles to write her memoir, often listening to a story within a story from varying perspectives. Just as Scheherazade narrates across genres, so does Sarah. By creating a fictional memoir as told by Sarah, Alameddine collapses distinctions between autobiography, fiction, storyteller, and listener.

Through the fictional retelling of Sarah's life, Alameddine uses this framing technique to distance himself from autobiography—ironically using the very structure of the genre to do so.

He sketches out the portrait of an unfinished woman who is in a state of constant revision, refusing to fix her identity in a genre that seeks to define identity. What is most interesting about this fictional autobiography is that the first-chapters structure allows the author to distance himself from his autobiographical protagonist. If Rabih Alameddine is a gay man, Sarah Nour El-Din is a straight woman. If he is fully Lebanese, she is half Lebanese, half American. While she is in the process of writing her autobiography, he is in the act of fictionalizing her narrative. What they share in common is the search for their identities as Lebanese Americans, and for their place within their families.

The narrative framing of *I, the Divine* also renders the fictional memoir as a postmodern metanarrative. As a postmodern memoir, the text is self-conscious and self-reflexive about its status as an autobiographical work in progress. Sarah is conscious throughout *I, the Divine* that she is trying to create a work of memory, thereby imitating memoir and the act of writing autobiography (also characteristic of postmodernism). Through the various genre shifts and perspective changes, the reader is aware that the autobiographical subject struggles to discern between reality and the imaginary. According to Patricia Waugh, “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to itself as an artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). She continues to assert, metafiction “explores a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction” (2). Moreover, by appropriating John Barth’s analysis on the postmodern novel, it becomes clear that the first-chapters form of *I, the Divine* self-reflexively refers to itself as a memoir, novel and epistolary, rather than a record of reality.⁴ The reader witnesses the memoir’s struggle to come into fruition. Through Sarah’s personal reflection and inability to cogently narrate her past life experiences, the author draws attention to the postmodern quality of life writing in *I, the Divine*, wherein the

autobiographical narrator is not reliable for her interpretation of the past. In some ways, the work resembles a historiographic metafiction, as it makes an intervention into the way Sarah's past is recalled and recorded (Hutcheon 285). Yet, it is not bound up with rewriting master narratives about history, but rather, confronting Sarah's own narrative fallacies about her life. As a work in progress, *I, the Divine* is more about the process of recording and remembering, as it is about the finished testimony.

The first-chapters fictional memoir not only defies the narrative conventions of a memoir and novel, but the structure similarly undermines the Global North's truth-telling expectations of the native informant's testimonial. Instead of the expected chronological sequencing, the author creates a new arena for confessional discourse through the recurrent act of retelling one's life stories from similar, and yet distinct, angles. This seems to solve the problem of the hoaxing evident in the texts of Norma Khouri, Souad, and Rigoberta Menchu. Through the fictional, first-chapters retelling of life history, Alameddine creates the anti-memoir, which refuses to settle itself. As further evidence, consider the title, *I, the Divine*, as a reworking of the controversial 1982 Guatemalan eponymous testimonio: *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. Rather than place the historical "I" at the center of the text, Alameddine suggests that the autobiographical "I" is superhuman, rather than human. Sarah is not limited to the boundaries of truth telling encouraged by life writing. Instead, through the creative narrative form of the text, Alameddine is able to create the anti-memoir, which refuses to limit itself to autobiographical history. In so doing, he mocks the initial truth claims of autobiographical hoaxers, emphasizing the quality and morality of the narrative, rather than on its veracity.

By opening up the form of the text, Alameddine similarly widens the narrative possibilities for his protagonist, who defies the reader's expectations that since she is a woman

from the Middle East, she is a Muslim and a victim. Because Sarah belongs to the Druze religion, which emerged from Ismailism, she breaks through the profile of the self-victimizing Muslim woman. Rather, on her path to self-discovery, she realizes that there is no conclusive resolution to explain her life experiences, or to reconcile her cultural in-betweenness. Just as the text is unfinished, so is she, constantly moving through a process of revision and renewal. Alameddine, therefore, manipulates the genre of memoir, mirroring the complexity of writing with the protagonist's struggle to develop the self, unfixing Sarah's identity in the process.

Locating Self in I, the Divine: A Study of the Autobiographical "I"

In such a complicated memoir, broken into a series of first chapters, it becomes important to track the various autobiographical "I" voices in the text, not only as an homage to the "I" in the title, but as a method for understanding Sarah's identity formation. The distinction between the various "I"s within autobiographical writing becomes crucial for understanding *I, the Divine*. Drawing on the heavyweights of autobiographical theory studies Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, there are four autobiographical "I"s to distinguish between in autobiographical writing: the "historical 'I,' the narrating 'I,' the narrated 'I' and the ideological 'I'" (*Reading Autobiography* 72). The differences between these subjective voices are as follows: the historical "I" is rooted in the gender and biological background of the autobiographer, the narrating "I" is the one producing the narrative, the narrated "I" is the self which comes across after the process of narration has concluded, and the ideological "I" is a composite of the autobiographer's surrounding society and values. These distinctions are helpful for determining the various modes of narration in *I, the Divine*, which offer a multitude of reflections for viewing the fictionalized autobiographical subject.

When applying these useful distinctions, one observes that, as with other autobiographical narratives, there is a difference between the “I” narrating and the one who is narrated. The cyclical aspect of *I, the Divine*, which contains recurring chapters repeatedly reminds the reader of the narrating “I,” who struggles to tell her story. The narrated “I,” on the other hand, is the persona of Sarah, who is communicated by the narrating “I” throughout the pages of the fictional memoir. The transformational quality of the narrative “I” allows Sarah to slip in and out of varying perspectives about her life, opening up life writing to depict the negotiation of multiple selves. The identification of the varying autobiographical “I”s allows the reader to understand the multiple layers of Sarah’s identity construction. Just as the text employs so many “I”s, it makes use of varying genres.

Each autobiographical “I” is fragmented in its own way, suggesting that there is a halving, splitting, and even doubling of Sarah. While the narrating “I” can be the “agent of discourse,” as Françoise Lionnet suggests, it can be a disjointed narrator, who takes on a multitude of voices (qtd in. *Reading Autobiography* 73). This is especially true in the case of *I, the Divine*, wherein the author casts Sarah as the autobiographical writer, narrating “I” and omniscient narrator. The narrating “I” mostly speaks from the first-person perspective as Sarah, but it also communicates from the perspective of the second-person, third-person, and collective perspectives (73). In the text, Sarah often switches between perspectives, disrupting the notion that there is a unified, singular autobiographical narrator. Her inclusion of each family member’s subjectivity, particularly as she writes through their perspective, suggests her identity occupies multiple subject positions. Mirrored in the text’s series of fragmented and incomplete chapters, the narrating “I” is “split, fragmented, provisional, multiple,” oscillating between the waves of unification and separation (74). Similarly, the narrated “I” is also fragmented and fractured, since

it depends on the sense temporality of the narrating “I.” The narrated “I” from Sarah’s childhood, for instance, is dependent on what the narrating “I” recalls and chooses to retell. It is constantly constructed by the mature narrating “I,” who attempts to bring meaning to the child’s narrative and experiences from the position of an adult. Of course, this notion is further complicated by the fact that in addition to Sarah, the implied author is also Rabih Alameddine.

Additionally, the historical “I” and the ideological “I” affect the way in which the reader receives the narrative. The historical “I” refers to the foundational elements of Sarah’s character makeup, such as her gender and multi-ethnic background as both Lebanese and American. These are the more permanent identity markers that she embraces throughout the text. Both her gender and ethnicity affect her sense of identity, as she journeys to find the self (72). Similarly, the ideological “I” is a sum of the external socio-cultural forces that affect self-discovery and understanding. Self-relation in the ideological “I” is rooted in ideological and cultural discourses that shape the self. It is “the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when she/he tells her/his story” (62). In Sarah’s case, her ideological “I” is shaped by her dual Lebanese and American backgrounds, which includes a life spent in transit between Lebanon and the United States. The narrative “I” contributes to the shaping of the ideological “I” throughout the book, with help from form. To differentiate between the various modes of production in *I, the Divine*, I categorize my analysis of form according to the following genres: memoir, novel, and epistolary. The narrative “I” uses each distinct form to explore the composite of Sarah’s autobiographical voices.⁵

**Diversifying Autobiographical Form:
I, the Divine as Memoir, Novel, and Epistolary**

The Memoir

At first, Sarah begins narrating her life story more traditionally along the lines of memoir, assuming the first-person perspective of the narrated “I,” who consciously attempts to inform her reader about her experiences. She initially begins her narration of the first-person testimonial, beginning a chapter, “I have a great story to tell you. I was there. This is what I saw” (Alameddine 136). She begins to show the complex family dynamics between her father and stepmother and her, beginning each of the short five paragraphs that compose the chapter with the repetition of the phrase, “I saw” (136–37). In using the past tense, Sarah highlights the difference between the narrating “I” and the narrated “I,” struggling to see her memories anew. The narrating “I” begins the section by locating herself in history. Like the autobiographers of the bildungsroman memoir, she revisits her childhood from the perspective of the narrating adult. Additionally, this brief example illuminates the narrated “I’s” development in the process of crafting her coming-of-age memoir. Sarah is shaped by the memories and experiences that she struggles to revisit.

In order to frame discussions about the self, Sarah first introduces herself to the reader through a story about her name. While she focuses on the process of her naming to conclude something about her individual identity, what ensues is a lengthy discussion about her relationship to her grandfather that she peppers throughout the text. The passage foreshadows a series of mirror stages throughout the book, in which the autobiographical “I” is constantly shifting, changing, and forming in relation to others throughout her fictional memoir. The book opens with the legend of her name, a point that is further elaborated and discussed at the text’s circular closing. The first Chapter One of the text opens as follows: “My grandfather named me

for the great Sarah Bernhardt. He considered having met her in person the most important event of his life. He talked about her endlessly. By the age of five, I was able to repeat each of his stories verbatim. And I did” (Alameddine 3). While Sarah opens her narrative from the first-person perspective, it quickly becomes clear that her identity is forged by outside forces. As Sarah notes, by the age of five, she had memorized her grandfather’s stories and imitated his enthusiasm for her namesake. Her grandfather’s naming of Sarah after the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, the Divine Sarah, is a motif which echoes throughout her life and the pages of her fictional memoir. Sarah Bernhardt becomes the legendary figure whom Sarah often invokes, ponders, and compares herself to throughout her narrative journey. It is fitting that Sarah’s role model is a French actress who imitates life on the stage, just as Sarah Nour El-Din imitates Sarah throughout her life. In a Lacanian sense, Sarah’s recognition of self doubly depends on her grandfather’s perception of her, and her perception of the Divine Sarah. From a young age, she mirrors and imitates the stories from Sarah Bernhardt’s life. Sarah employs a *meconnaissance*,⁶ a misrecognition of self, since she believes her grandfather’s obsession with Sarah Bernhardt informs her identity.

Her grandfather’s act of naming Sarah therefore attempts to shape her identity. The passage shows the transformative process of the ideological “I,” who is socially constructed by one of the many parental figures in her life. Sarah remarks about her grandfather, “Since he chose my name, stamped me, I immediately became his favorite granddaughter” (77). The story of Sarah’s naming demonstrates power that is asserted through this act. Judith Butler asserts in *Excitable Speech*, the process of naming underscores the inversion of the Self and the Other, demonstrating the power of the subject, the Other, who names the object, the Self (Butler *Excitable Speech* 29). The self-perceived subject is actually an object, since the naming subject

grants the receiving object the name. As a result, the object is brought into “social location and time” through the action of being named (29). This is further pronounced by the fact that Sarah is named after a French actress, thereby, signaling colonial influences that affected her Lebanese grandfather.

The process of naming in the text affects the development of Sarah’s historical “I.” Throughout her life, her grandfather attempts to wield his power and influence over her by reaffirming his role in naming her after the actress Sarah Bernhardt. This results in Sarah Nour El-Din’s careful study of Sarah Bernhardt’s life as way of understanding her own. She mimics Bernhardt’s appearance of femininity and sexuality, performing a socially constructed form of gender prompted by her grandfather’s naming. She repeatedly invokes Sarah throughout her memoir, which further contributes to a repeated performance of gender cued by the persona of Divine Sarah (Butler *Gender Trouble* xv). After listening to one of her grandfather’s stories about Bernhardt, Sarah internalizes the similarities, remarking, “She’s just like me” (294). The process of becoming centers on the Self/Other relationship, situating Sarah Nour El-Din as the Self and Sarah Bernhardt as the Other.

The process of naming has a clear impact on Sarah’s identity formation, which is further complicated by the flashback revelation that Sarah was not named after Sarah Bernhardt, but for the Druze heroine and leader, Sarah. This compliments her last name, Nour El-Din, Arabic for “light of religion.”⁷ The author begins to blend the forms of memoir and novel writing, since Sarah actively presents the extensive conversation she had with her sister Amal in the present tense. At the end of her narrative, Sarah discovers her true namesake, in a cyclical return to the text’s opening. Amal, asks her:

“Do you ever wonder why he always told you the story of the Prince of Believers, but not the story of Sarah?”

He always told stories of Sarah. What are you talking about?

“Not Bernhardt, dummy. Sarah the first woman sent out on the Druze Call. You don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you? You don’t know who your real namesake is?”

No idea at all.

“Sarah was the reason we are here. We are the direct descendants of the people she converted ... Sarah was the reason we are here ... He preferred to fill your head with stores of the Divine Sarah, but not the Druze Sarah.”

(Alameddine 288–89)

Written in the present, second-person perspective, Amal reveals to Sarah her true namesake and intended role model, the Druze Sarah. Their grandfather’s deception becomes the focal point for the chapter’s revelation, contributing to the text’s feel as a historiographic metafiction that relies on questioning accepted truths. The fact that he had named Sarah and treated her best of the three girls born to Sarah’s parents was always in her mind a testament to her namesake Sarah Bernhardt. Yet, through this exchange with her sister, the reader discovers alongside Sarah that her grandfather had favored her because she was the third girl to be born to her Lebanese father and American mother, dashing any future hopes of a male familial heir. Her gender and bi-racial origins become the excuses that her grandfather invokes to push for a divorce between his son and his all-American daughter-in-law. Ironically, her grandfather’s gender discrimination against women counters Sarah’s true namesake, the Druze Sarah, who helped establish the very religion he follows.

While most of the memoir portion of *I, the Divine* attempts to narrate through the first-person perspective, during this revelation, Sarah focuses on Amal's perspective of her naming and relationship to her grandfather, highlighting the use of the second person "you." The passage depends on Amal's subjectivity to rewrite a critical point about Sarah's identity. Throughout this section of the chapter, Sarah's first-person "I" is absent to make way for Amal's rereading of Sarah's historical "I" through the repetition of "you." It takes Sarah many pages and many years to process this information, and she remarks simply, "It took me years to accept the truth" (Alameddine 293). The narrated "I" finally resurfaces in this moment, before continuing narration about another story relating to her grandfather.

What emerges through the stories retold about the changing significations of Sarah's name is the complex relationship between the individual Self and the family collective, the Other. Halfway through her autobiographical retelling, her memoir transitions from the "Contemporary Bildungsroman" memoir to an autobiographical "Narrative of Family." As Smith and Watson assert, narratives of family are becoming a popular response to life histories confronting war and immigration, while readdressing issues concerning participatory citizenship and nation-building (*Reading Autobiography* 154). Narratives of family and filiation usually explore the relationship of the autobiographical subject to a prominent parental figure, whether it is the presence or absence of a parent or family member. Women, in particular, have been authoring family narrative memoirs in order to determine their role in the institution of family.

Much of Sarah's reflection about family has to do with her relationship to her American mother, Janet Foster, who is absent for most of her life. Like many memoirs written by women, which focus on familial relationships, Sarah reflects on motherhood. She creates parallels between her mother's failure as a parent to her own failure as a mother for her son. She opens her

reflections about her mother, simply stating, “I believe I reminded my mother of her failures” (52). Sarah makes this statement toward the beginning of her autobiographical journey, wherein she introduces one of the central motifs in her memoir: her mother/hood.

When focusing on her mother, Sarah fears most that she will become like her. Chapter headings such as “My Mother and I” and “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, I Am My Mother After All” explore the cyclical relationship between Sarah and her mother (44 and 138). For instance, before her mother commits suicide, she fails to complete her own memoirs. When remembering the last time she saw her mother, Sarah recalls, “All she could talk about were her memoirs. She saw herself as an artist, a painter, although she never really painted, having all the neuroses of an artist, but none of the talent ... Write, write, write, she said. All I do is write. It’s so liberating” (56). Her mother never manages to finish writing her memoir, since she commits suicide. In fact, Sarah soon discovers that her mother’s software program converting audible speech into typed text has been malfunctioning and could not have completed a comprehensible transcription. The climax of Janet’s story pairs the inability to write and finish a memoir with self-termination. It is as if Alameddine warns his protagonist against becoming too attached to the finished result of the life-writing process.

Just as Janet is unable to pen her own memoir, she fails to pursue her artistic endeavors, suggesting she is creatively stymied. After her mother’s suicide, Sarah visits Janet’s New York apartment and finds “papers stacked underneath a heavy book of impressionist paintings. There were only ten of them, all of them seemed abandoned after a couple of strokes. Some were left in mid-stroke. So many false starts. I began to cry” (263). Janet’s unfinished paintings are a reminder of her other unfinished endeavors, such as writing, parenting, loving, and living. She

abandons her paintings mid-action, incapable of completion. She is as unfinished as her projects, refusing a settling closure in the narrative.

Sarah is haunted most by her mother's example, internalizing Janet's story as her own, transitioning the bildungsroman to a narrative about family. Like her mother, Sarah is a divorcée and absent mother. Observing these traits as a cyclical tracing of her mother's life, Sarah chronicles her neglect throughout *I, the Divine*. After moving to New York with her first husband, Omar Farouk, she divorces him because she does not want to return to Beirut when he completes his studies. Because he insists raising Kamal, their son, in Lebanon, she resigns to send her son back with Omar. Sarah recalls confessing to a new lover about her failure to be a mother to her son, stating, "I told him about Kamal, about the crushing choices I had to make, how much pain being without my son caused. I told him about my inadequacies as a mother, as a wife" (22). In this moment, Sarah doubly confesses: first, to David Troubridge, her lover at the time, and secondly, to the reader through the form of the confessional autobiography. She fixates on her mother's troubled life, internalizing the similarities to her own. Just as Janet had been absent during her childhood, so was Sarah during Kamal's youth.

Absorbed in the Self/Other narrative of herself and her mother, it is not surprising that Sarah is angered by her father and grandfather's poor treatment of her mother, since at this point, she has difficulty differentiating herself from her mother. Sarah recalls her mother's chilling description of her grandfather, who said, "'You know, Janet, I love this girl so much. Do you know why?' Like an idiot, I asked, 'Why?' And he said, 'I love her so much because she's the reason I am going to be able to return you to your fucking country'" (295). Using Janet's inability to provide a son, after birthing three daughters, as an excuse, Sarah's grandfather persuades his son to divorce her. It was after hearing this revelation about her grandfather's

mistreatment of her mother, and the true story behind the origins of her name, that Sarah observes the ways in which her father, grandfather, and mother influenced the development of her historical “I.”

It is not until she recognizes her internalization of their life stories that she breaks the cycle of becoming just like them. She reconciles with her father, reflecting, “I did not forgive my father his treatment of my mother until I repeated the same story, taking on the roles of Mustapha and Janet simultaneously. Like Mustapha, I fell out of love with my husband, and like Janet, I am no longer with my child. I made mistakes” (49). This is the turning point for Sarah, who experiences a moment of Lacanian *connaissance*, in which she recognizes the Self as distinct from the Other. In so doing, she is able to recognize the pivotal role that her family plays in her identity formation, as something auxiliary and not central to her development.

It is for this reason that she concludes her memoir with a narrative focused solely on the family as a collective unit. Invoking an analogous comparison to a pride of lions, Sarah comments, “If I wanted to know about *lion*, I had to look at the entire pride. I had to look at it not as a single organism per se, but as a new unit much larger than the sum of its parts” (308). Alameddine poetically employs synecdoche to illuminate the complex and intertwined relationships of the Nour El-Din Family, wherein an individual represents the whole, and the family represents the part. Linguistically, “lion” becomes a stand-in for “Sarah,” while “pride” signals “Nour El-Din.”

Though at the beginning of her memoir, Sarah focuses on her naming as a reflection of her individual identity, by the narrative’s end, she refocuses her attention on the family collective and its impact on her autobiographical voice. In conclusion, she writes:

I had tried to write my memoir by telling an imaginary reader to listen to my story. Come learn about me, I said. I have a great story to tell you because I have had led an interesting life. Come meet me. But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life? Who am I if I not where I fit in the world, where I fit in the lives of the people dear to me? I have to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism, to show how I fit into this larger whole. So instead of telling the reader, Come meet me, I have to say something else.

Come meet my family.

Come meet my friends.

Come here, I say.

Come meet my pride. (308)

Sarah's repeated invocation of "my story" and "great story" recalls her resemblance to the Sheherazadian storyteller who, throughout varying autobiographical forms and narrative perspectives, attempts to narrate her life story to reach a deeper understanding of self. She repeats synecdoche, comparing her family to a larger organism and pride. In this passage, however, the word "pride" additionally reflects its second and more traditional meaning: a feeling of deep pleasure and satisfaction, which is derived from her family ("pride" n.1.). True to the form of the family narrative, Sarah's memoir concludes with a realization about her family.

The mixture of perspectives, voices, and genres throughout the text parallels the difficulties that Sarah faces in writing her memoir. In a later chapter, Sarah reflects on the challenges of penning her memoir, "I was having trouble writing my memoir, not being able to figure out how to attack it. I had tried different methods, but the memoir parried back expertly"

(306). It is for this reason that in the discussion of her memoir, I would like to explore the other forms that she employs to discuss the autobiographical “I,” namely, the novel and the epistolary.

The Novel

When experiencing difficulty in speaking about traumatic moments from her past, Sarah moves into using the third-person perspective to narrate her life story. It is not surprising for her to use the third person in order to distance herself from that moment, and to deny the reader the voyeurism typically associated with Third World women’s autobiographies. In order to speak about the trauma of surviving a war-torn Beirut and a violent rape, Sarah transitions from using the first person narrative “I” to the third person. She attempts to narrate in the first person, but cannot seem to finish her narration when speaking in the first person. In a chapter written like a memoir, Sarah foreshadows her rape with the description of a ravaged Beirut torn apart by the Lebanese Civil War. She begins the chapter, observing, “It was 1976. The city was beginning to look damaged. I could feel the ripening sun burn my skin ... The dress exposed my shoulders, which the sun attacked mercilessly. Merciless. That evening was merciless” (113). Sarah narrates this chapter describing the vandalized city through the first-person “I,” attempting to narrate her explicit description of her violent rape. But, she stops short of doing so, ending the chapter with a narration about the heat of the night and her inability to find a taxi.

In this chapter, Sarah can only foreshadow her rape, using a description of the violent evening as a metaphor to foretell her pain. She describes the sun that had burned her skin as “merciless;” it is menacing, able to attack, ripen and burn. Additionally, she describes Beirut in August as “detestable,” where “even the air is filthy” (113). She repeats the word “filthy” throughout the chapter, foreshadowing feelings of uncleanness, which follow her rape. The

chapter is only a page and a third long, demonstrating her reluctance to write about her rape. The reader does not fully understand the purpose of this chapter until nine chapters later, after reading through chapters written in French and English that employ varying styles from the novel, epistolary, and memoir. It seems as though Sarah writes for some time before she can return to confronting her rape.

When Sarah is finally able to discuss her rape, the narrating “I” assumes the role of the omniscient, third-person narrator in order to create as much distance between the autobiographical narrator and the text. In the chapter entitled “Spilt Wine,” Sarah describes her rape, using the third-person perspective typically associated with novels. By using the third-person “she,” instead of the first-person “I,” Sarah attempts to distance herself from reliving her rape. In the earlier, unfinished version of this account retold in a previous chapter, Sarah had attempted to describe the traumatic event in the first person “I.” But since she never describes the rape in the first-person perspective, it is clear that the more personal perspective prevents her from speaking about an event so traumatic.

In the description of her rape, Sarah fuses images of violence and brutality with images of the sky as a way to map her rape. On that hot, “detestable” August night, Sarah hales an ordinary vehicle in lieu of a taxi, a common practice in Beirut. But, instead of driving her home, the two men in the car gang rape her. When she first realizes she is going to be raped, her awareness is as clear as the sky. In the third-person, Sarah narrates, “She raised her eyes and saw the pale sky. Blue, no cloud in sight” (196). As the events of her rape intensify, so does her perception of the sky. When she realizes she will suffer, she recalls, “The sky was hazy, or was her vision?” (196). As her fear grows, she again invokes the sky, “The sky ... Where was the sky? It had disappeared ... She felt she was about to dissolve, as well” (196). Wishing she could dissolve or

evaporate, she couples her inability to locate the sky with her powerlessness to escape her impending rape. She continues to use the sky as a metaphor when narrating the explicit brutality of her rape. All throughout the rape, Sarah recalls, “She only saw the sky for a second because the pain caused her to faint...The sky had disappeared. She closed her eyes, out of pain, out of bitterness, out of shame. The sky was darker now” (197-98). When Sarah becomes aware of her reality again, the men are gone and the sky is dark. She attempts to cope by displacing her pain and focusing on the larger universe above her. The sky metaphor is a barometer for her condition, coupling personal tragedy with atmospheric gloom. If she desires to disappear, the sky vanishes. If she is blackened and bruised, so is the sky, growing darker in shadow. The metaphor artfully echoes throughout the chapter to signal the catastrophic event, as well as Sarah’s break from reality. The passages are more suited to a postmodern novel, which troubles the lines between fiction and nonfiction.

In this short, nine-page chapter (the only chapter to explicitly discuss her rape), Sarah ponders its aftermath, immediately encountering difficulties in reconciling sexuality with her identity. Though she identifies that she is a victim of a crime immediately afterwards, she is most fearful of her father’s reaction. She recalls in this moment his strict standard of chastity for women, comparing their sexuality to fine linen destroyed by spilt wine. The chapter is named for this analogy, wherein Sarah remembers her father, Mustapha, having said, “a girl’s sexuality ... is like fine linen ... If a carafe of wine is spilled on it, it will never come off. You can wash it and wash it, but it can never be the same” (127). Her father’s conflation of virginity and cleanliness haunts Sarah, as she repeatedly attempts to regain her “purity” through the act of bathing.

The author contrasts the violence of Sarah’s rape with the intensity of her bathing, an act she repeats throughout various points in her memoir to signal her trauma. Sarah links her desire

to regain her virginity with her father's archaic sense of female purity. In the bath, she repeatedly scrubs the "dark blood," which "mocked the pallor of her skin," recalling her father's analogy of the spilt wine destroying the table finery (199). Earlier in the memoir, Sarah performs the same act of scrubbing, invoking a ritualized cleansing during her initial attempt to recall her rape. She speaks in the present day from the position of the narrating "I," who attempts to record and retell her story.

In one of the first invocations of the third-person perspective in the text, Sarah attempts to describe the aftermath of the rape, though the reader does not know what she is trying to remember. In her San Francisco apartment, years later, she wades through her murky memory, narrating, "She steps into the tub. It is smaller than the one in Beirut. Still, she remembers being lost in that tub, totally immersed, she remembers trying to get clean. She scrubbed herself with the loofah, over and over, as if there was some dark stain and she Lady Macbeth. Out, damn spot. She was dirty, all of her" (82). Likening Sarah to Lady Macbeth, Alameddine recalls the forceful energy that both women use to cleanse themselves from impurities. As a postmodern text, *I, the Divine* references literature rather than reality by comparing Sarah to Lady Macbeth. Furthermore, the author invokes literary motifs of water imagery to signal its purifying capability: it is used to wash, cleanse, baptize, and hydrate. The repetitive act of cleansing and bathing, which resurfaces periodically throughout the text, simultaneously signals the intensity of Sarah's trauma and her difficulty of remembering and retelling it in her memoir.

The author is cognizant that as a first-chapters memoir, Sarah's initial inability to write about her rape parallels any writer's difficulty in writing about rape, whether it is in fiction or nonfiction. Sarah remembers how, shortly after her rape, her best friend Dina was supposed to draw "rape" in a game of French Pictionary. A bewildered Sarah asks, "How does one draw

rape?” (201). Indeed, Alameddine seems to pose the same question, how does one *write* about rape? It is not until Sarah begins narrating in the third-person that she is able to speak about it, suggesting that the change in perspective and genre allows her to assume a narrative flexibility that will allow her to communicate fragments from her life story to her reader.

Just as Sarah invokes the third-person to write about her rape, she uses the perspective to discuss other difficult aspects from her life, such as her liminality between Lebanon and the United States. After her ex-husband graduates from an American university and returns to Beirut with her son, Sarah processes the absence of her immediate family. Roaming the streets of New York, Sarah discusses her sense of loss in a chapter that she narrates in the third person. She writes, “She walks the morose streets, circular peregrinations that leave her soul troubled. Lost afternoons. Yet she cannot go back there. She does not feel part of that world either. She never did. The family she abandoned is there. Her husband. Her child. She will put it behind her. There will always be *there*” (99).⁸ The narrating “I” recalls Sarah’s simultaneous sense of loss and alienation. She paints a gloomy portrait of her self-imposed exile, as she walks aimlessly along sullen streets in a city whose vastness encourages anonymity. The word “circular” signals the cyclical reiterations of the first-chapters and the reoccurring wanderings of the autobiographical narrator. Sarah’s loss pervades the excerpt, wherein she compares her homelessness in New York with her abandonment of Kamal, her son. She attempts to reconcile the “here” of her New York surroundings with the “there” of her familial Beirut.

Upon suffering alienation as a part of leaving her homeland, Sarah, an immigrant writer, searches for a reconstituted identity and self-discovery in the quest for a new home. Focusing on her sense of liminality, she feels neither here nor there, much like Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis*. Sarah is half Lebanese and half American, moving between both societies, while Marjane is

Iranian, moving between Europe and Iran. Inevitably, both figures feel alienated in their adopted American and European countries, but when they return to their homeland, they do not feel at home there, either. About her homelessness, Sarah concludes, “Can there be any *here*? No. She understands *there*. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not” (99).⁹ Through the third-person narration, Sarah is able to use her emotional distance to reflect on the difficulty of life in self-imposed exile. While exile severs the writer’s tie to nation, it paradoxically offers a freedom to create a new identity through the record of home in narrative form. Through the distance that writing in exile affords, a writer such as Sarah can gain perspective to see home clearly, and make comparisons with her new surroundings. As she ruminates, she realizes that for her, home is always elsewhere. It eludes her, as she feels she no longer fully belongs to either place or either society. Thus, she begins to reconcile the precarious notion that she may never again feel complete or find home. She learns to cope with the feeling of un-belonging, using it as a strength to question established norms and customs of the Lebanese and American societies through which she travels.

The Epistolary

After attempting to frame her first-chapters narrative as a memoir and novel, Sarah turns to the form of the epistolary, a novel told through the letter correspondence of her sister Lamia. The shift between methods of life storytelling and the repetition of stories in the first-chapters model are significant, since, first, they highlight the difficulty and multiplicity of remembering, and second, illuminate the many sides and reverberations of a story (Salaita, *Modern Arab* 48). By presenting the reader with a fragmented view of the autobiographical subject, Alameddine

offsets the notion that a singular truth should be expected from life writing. He pairs the flexibility of form with the mutability of the autobiographical “I,” suggesting that one genre is not enough to contain life story.

Continuing to pull the threads of the Family Narrative throughout the second half of her first-chapters memoir, Sarah employs the epistolary to explore her sister Lamia, and to evaluate her relationship with their father and their absent mother. When Lamia, a nurse, is arrested for killing her patients, Sarah immediately reflects on her father, a doctor, and his sense of honor, as evidenced by her confession, “I am ashamed to admit my first reaction was not concern for Lamia, but for my father” (Alameddine 126). The revelations of Lamia’s crimes headlined as “Nurse Killed Patients to Have Quiet Shifts,” violates her father’s sense of duty, just as Sarah’s rape had (Salaita *Modern Arab* 51). It is not surprising, that at such a moment, Sarah avoids a first-person narration as much as possible, instead fully focusing on Lamia’s perspective through the epistolary. By reading and reprinting a series of unsent letters written by Lamia to their American mother, Sarah explores her mother’s abandonment and the effect that it had on Lamia’s troubled psyche. Lamia’s killing spree (she murdered seven patients and attempted to murder two others) impacts the entire family clan, serving as the emotional climax and crisis in *I, the Divine*. Ultimately, the shift in genre and perspective allows Sarah to include another family member’s perspective in her autobiographical work, further rendering the text as a narrative about family.

After learning of Lamia’s crime, Sarah makes direct linkages between the collection of unsent letters and Lamia’s insanity, suggesting their mother’s absence and rejection is partly responsible. Over a thirty-five year span, Lamia wrote letters to her mother, letters that she never mailed. Had she mailed them, she most likely would not have gotten a reply, since Janet had not

written before, explaining “away her lack of letters as distaste for epistolary communications (her exact words)” (Alameddine 146). After Mustapha divorces Janet, she returns to the United States, prompting Lamia to write a series of letters, which concludes with the following plea:

“Come back, Mommy.” The last, written with her Dupont fountain pen on light blue stationary, was a six-page letter detailing in jumbled, nonlinear prose all that had transpired since the previous letter, all the pain, all the loneliness, all the insanity. In between those two, there were over four hundred and fifty letters, written about once a month, in which Lamia chronicled her life and feelings in a mundane running conversation. (147)

Sarah employs the narrating “I” to actively describe Lamia’s predicament, which juxtaposes the elegance of her stationary with her confused writing during Lamia’s attempt to invent a relationship with her mother. Epistolary serves as her own type of life writing, wherein Lamia records her life’s story through a series of written monologues and invented responses (as she fakes her mother’s replies). Lamia’s desperation in writing is compounded by the knowledge of her mother’s early abandonment, which Sarah surmises had triggered her insanity. Though Lamia is the most outwardly troubled sister, Sarah and Amal both internalize and exhibit pain, loneliness, and instability linked to the abandonment and suicide of their mother. Consequently, Lamia’s tragedy highlights their own struggles to reconcile the loss of their mother.

Though Sarah recaptures Lamia’s story in this section of her memoir, it is no less a personal reflection of her autobiographical self. Sarah reconsiders, “I had always thought I was the one who took after my mother. After all, I inherited her exotic looks, her artistic tendencies, her mood swings, her Americanness. I was the one who was perpetually lost, always trying to find myself in the rubble. But in the end, I realized it was my sister Lamia who took after my

mother. She inherited her insanity” (149). Sarah repeatedly invokes her feeling of “loss,” which she had attributed to the absence of her mother while growing up, and to her suicide later in life. Janet’s suicide and Lamia’s killings are linked in a violent cycle symptomatic of troubled lives.

Like the variation between each chapter in the first-chapters retelling, each letter’s salutations begins differently, addressing her mother as “Janet,” “Mommy,” and “Mother.” Reflective of Lamia’s mood, both the greeting and signature change, depending on her state of mind. Of the letters presented in the text, Lamia varies the closure of her letters, writing: “Love, Your lovely daughter Lamia,” “Love, Your good daughter Lamia,” “Only Love, Lamia,” or just “Lamia” (149–66). She reaffirms her kinship to her mother, repeating the use of the words “your” and “love.” When trying to explain that she overmedicated patients at the hospital so that she could have peaceful shifts, Lamia justifies her actions, at the same time reaffirming her invented bond with her mother. In the last letter copied in the memoir, Lamia appeals to her mother’s invented love, “I know you understand and one day you will sit me and we will talk and I wil say why all this happens and you will understand and I now you love me but I want you to see everything and not sit in new york and worry about wrong and right you see. I do the best thing for people because I’am solve problem” (166). In this monologue, Lamia explains with broken English and basic writing skills, her appeal for her mother’s understanding. She anticipates her mother’s empathy, imagining future, in-person conversations wherein her mother will comprehend her actions. The unrevised and broken nature of her writing mirrors the splintering and fracturing she experiences internally.

Lamia’s confession in her letter draws a parallel to life writing, in which the autobiographer depends on the reader to validate testimony. In this case, Lamia relies on her mother to “see” and understanding her motives for killing her patients. Lamia reaffirms her

belief in her mother's love, so that she can feel pardoned of these crimes. Believing she is a problem-solver, Lamia incorrectly declares, "I'am solve problem." The reordering of the verb and noun, which should have read, "I'm a problem solver," or "I solve problems," suggests that she is resolved: as a character and as Sarah's sister. Since she is a murderess, killing patients for her own comfort, her character's insanity is exposed at the seams. Through the epistolary, the author explains, solves, and resolves Lamia's psychosis.

Because Lamia is Sarah's "least favorite sister," she serves as her antagonist and character foil. The revelation about Lamia serves as much a revelation about Sarah. In her letters, she describes Sarah's sexuality with violent imagery, ironically accurate, since she is ignorant of her rape. Lamia's perceives Sarah as a sex-machine, stating, "Sarah she swallows life out of her men" (156). Perhaps this rendering stands as a testament to Sarah's sexual power, particularly after her rape. Steven Salaita asserts that Lamia's presence here seems to serve as a reflection of "important features of the protagonist's ethics and personality" (*Modern Arab* 52). When evaluating Lamia's letters and reading through her perspective, Sarah explores factors contributing to her historical and ideological "I"s. She is able to compare her sister's internationalization of their mother's abandonment and subsequent insanity with her own inability to move past Chapter One in the process of writing her autobiography. Sarah begins to understand that neither a finished memoir nor a defined autobiographical "I" are necessary for reaching an understanding about the self. Rather, the liminal state in which she exists offers a productive place to ponder questions about identity, family, exile, nation-building, and citizenship.

In a conclusive statement pertaining to her ideological and historical "I"s, Sarah states toward the end of her memoir, "I have been blessed with many curses in my life, not the least of

which was being born half Lebanese and half American. Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion” (Alameddine 229). Similarly, Sarah’s narrative never comes to an end. Her narrative remains as open-ended as her life, continuing past the reader’s voyeuristic eyes. Neither progressing past Chapter One, nor reconciling her various identities, Sarah ends her last first-chapter by invoking the pride of lions as a metaphor for her family. In speaking about family at the narrative’s end, Sarah roots her sense of belonging and certainty in the family collective, providing a partial resolution to her sense of belonging.

The text employs a range of various forms of life writing to discuss the self, including the: coming-of-age memoir, bildungsroman, novel, epistolary, and the family narrative memoir. *I, the Divine* serves as a literary survey that demonstrates the range of memoir, providing a commentary on the art of life writing. It is self-reflexive and postmodern, depicting the autobiographical subject’s difficulty in recording personal life history. It is for this reason that I chose this work to conclude my discussion of autobiographies produced by Middle Eastern women writers. The form of the text opens up possibilities for Middle Eastern women writers, defying the notion that they can only successfully produce the confessional memoir about leaving homeland. Rather, Alameddine suggests that life writing can actively employ creativity and fiction to explore discussions about the self.

Just as the memoir remains unfinished, so does the complete character sketch of Sarah Nour El-Din. Returning to Lillian Hellman, whom I invoked at the beginning of this chapter, the author states at the conclusion of her first memoir, *Unfinished Woman*, “I do regret that I have spent too much of my life trying to find what I called ‘truth,’ trying to find what I called ‘sense.’ I never knew what I meant by truth, never made the sense I hoped for. All I mean is that I left too

much of me unfinished because I wasted too much time. However” (280). The open-ended “however” in Hellman’s concluding statement contradicts her earlier proclamation that she had squandered time looking for self. Like Hellman, much of Sarah’s quest focuses on seeking truth, never finding it. Each time Sarah begins to feel rooted in an identity, she discovers a new truth about herself, unsettling any simplified categorization of self. Truly fitting, the clause “however” serves as a reminder that life writing is open-ended and unfinished, just like the autobiographical subject. Like the self, life writing is an on-going process.

The conventional confessional memoir encourages readers to voyeuristically gaze at the subject, expecting to view a fully sketched portrait of the autobiographer. But in this innovative example that affects Middle Eastern women’s life writing, the notion of an unfinished woman pervades, linking the partial glimpse of the self to the provisional form of the narrative. Perhaps, this might explain the recent serialization of memoirs, wherein Iranian American women writers have published their second memoir, about five years after their first one. For instance, Azar Nafisi had entitled her first memoir: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* from a list she had created, “Things I have been Silent About.” Not surprisingly, in December 2008, she debuted her second memoir using the list’s name as a title, *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories*. The autobiographical sequel suggests that it is difficult to contain an entire life story within the margins of a memoir. Additionally, Azadeh Moaveni followed her first memoir, *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) with *Honeymoon in Iran: Two Years of Love and Danger in Iran* (2009), and Firoozeh Dumas released *Laughing Without an Accent* (2008) after the success of *Funny in Farsi* (2003). Traditionally, memoir had been single volume testimonial, recounting an aspect or era from one’s life. Now, it seems that confessional is taking on characteristics and the marketability of the three-volume novel that suggests ongoing disclosure. On one hand, the notion of installments

may be a result of the marketability of memoirs, a popular genre for Middle Eastern American women writing about homeland and immigration. On the other, their serialization suggests that writers are still evolving, shifting, and changing, which should be reflected in their narratives. They are unfinished women, reconciling what it means to be in-between Middle Eastern and Euro-American societies.

Perhaps, it is more useful to consider that all the writers and autobiographical subjects of this study are unfinished. In the cases of Norma Khouri and Souad, the writers take up the position of victimized women from the Middle East, finding salvation in the “West.” They reify Orientalist stereotypes about Muslim women, suggesting that they are imprisoned by their respective Muslim societies. Yet, when their texts were deemed hoaxes and alternative autobiographical stories surfaced about each memoirist, readers wondered: who are the *real* Norma Khouri and Souad? In this case, the reader seems to only glimpse at the writer’s face, which hides behind the mask of representation.

Likewise, Firoozeh Dumas and Marjane Satrapi use humor to create a mask of sorts, one which allows for a careful selection of autobiographical disclosure. They use humor to ease cultural tension and reconcile political differences, but they also employ it as a strategy to signal a more creative autobiographical retelling of life story. While they provide counter-narratives to the sensationalist hoaxes produced by Khouri and Souad, they also relay bits and pieces of their autobiographical stories. They choose what might be funny or sardonic to tell their readers, using humor to create an innovative language that can communicate their traumatic experiences of leaving a post-revolutionary Iran and relocating to the United States and Europe. Because both Marjane Satrapi and Firoozeh Dumas released their memoirs in installments, they suggest, there is always a story to tell.

Finally, it must be considered that just as Rabih Alameddine renders his fictional autobiographical protagonist, Sarah Nour El-Din, in *I, the Divine* as unfinished, provisional and changing, so does Mohja Kahf in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. By penning a semi-autobiographical fiction, Kahf suggests that the inclusion of fiction allows for the communication of a life story that moves between the U.S. and Syria. Both her and her protagonist, Khadra Shamy, travel between Syrian and American spaces, negotiating what it means to be Muslim in America. By fictionalizing her personal life experiences throughout her prose and poetry, Kahf highlights the provisional aspects of life writing, suggesting that fictionalization is a way of coping with traumatic life experiences and moving past them. Just as Sarah in *I, the Divine* employs the third-person perspective to discuss painful feelings associated with her rape and her liminality between Lebanon and the United States, so does Khadra to discuss her sense of alienation in American society as a Muslim, Syrian woman.

Both Kahf and Alameddine use innovative forms of life writing to allow their protagonists to assume more flexible identities as they attempt to situate themselves as Middle Eastern women in American society. At the conclusion of both texts, the autobiographical narrators rely on the fictionalization of life story to work through the difficulties of remembering and retelling personal testimony. As Lynn Emanuel states in the beginning of this chapter, “Writing presents to us the nullity of ourselves, the inaccuracies of our conceptions of selfhood” (Emanuel 67). These Middle Eastern women writers are a work in progress, working through many revisions of the self in their writing, as they struggle to locate identity. What the reader observes in autobiographical texts written by Middle Eastern women writers is merely a representation of the self wherein the narrating “I” writes and rewrites the narrated “I” for artful negotiation on the page. The innovation of texts such as *Funny in Farsi*, *Persepolis*, *The Girl in*

the Tangerine Scarf and *I, the Divine* parallel the fluidity of form with the dynamism of Middle Eastern women who defy Orientalist stereotypes. In so doing, Middle Eastern female autobiographical subjects like Firoozeh Dumas, Marjane Satrapi, Mohja Kahf, and Sarah Nour El-Din shatter monolithic images with the diversity of their character.

Since beginning my research on Middle Eastern women's autobiographies in 2003, I have observed a shift in life writing: from the conventionally told confessional to more loose and creative interpretations of memoir. Whether authors have employed graphics and comic book illustrations, short humorous vignettes, fiction or poetry, experimentation with form seems to be at the heart of life writing today. The more disjoint form attempts to explain a complicated identity politics, mirroring a fragmented autobiographical self, who attempts to explode stereotypes revived in flatly told neo-Orientalist confessionals. In so doing, Middle Eastern American autobiographical women writers in the diaspora claim a space for themselves in ethnic-American discourses, proving that they are also threads in the social fabric of American citizenship.

¹ With the term "unwriting," I wish to suggest that the author destabilizes both the signifiers and the signified in the narrative. By dismantling form, the writer allows for a more organic text and self to shape. For a case study of unwriting, see Laurence Lerner's discussion in "Unwriting Literature."

² French for "Chapter One: The Beginning."

³ Borges' analysis of the Six Hundred and Second Night is one of the most contested in literary theory, as many writers assert that no such tale is told. What many scholars failed to identify was that Borges worked from the unabridged first edition written by Richard F. Burton and printed by the "Burton Club for Private Subscribers Only." If they had consulted Volume VI of the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, they would have discovered the tale of the "The King's Son and the

Ifrit's Mistress," wherein the king, mistrustful of his son, orders his son's death upon hearing he has lost his royal signet ring. The son had given his ring to a maiden he had satisfied, who had been married to a jealous Ifrit, a supernatural creature belonging to the magical species of the Jinn. The Ifrit locked her in a box because of his jealousy; and in retaliation, she swore to sexually satisfy herself with every man who crossed her path when he was asleep. After coition, she collects each man's ring, like that of the king son's. In total, she was approximated to have had eighty-five to ninety. The image of the rings is an illusion to the many King Shahryar had collected off his slain brides. After listening to the perspective of the jealous Ifrit's wife, Shahryar begins to understand the futility of his own jealousy. My inclusion of this lengthy summary is two-fold. First, I wish to restore meaning to Borges's analysis of the *Thousand and One Nights*, who did not just interpolate in his analysis, as most scholars have supposed. The only other scholar who seems to have tracked this story down is Evelyn Fishburn in her article, "Traces of a Thousand and One Nights in Borges." Secondly, I want to reinforce the connection between the cyclical framing in *A Thousand and One Nights* and *I, the Divine*.

⁴ Barth asserts that a postmodern novel is "a novel that imitates a novel rather than the real world" (qtd. in Currie 161).

⁵ In Tuija Saresma's autobiographical study, the historical "I" (which speaks to the subject's place in history) and the narrated "I" (the product of the writer's choices during self-representation) are also pertinent to the study of traditional autobiographies. In this case, however, the autobiographical subject is fictional. Her history is created by the author. If I discuss the historical "I" or the narrated "I," it is from the perspective of the fictionalized narrating "I," so that I can discuss Sarah as the active autobiographer.

⁶ For a lengthier discussion of the Self/Other as it pertains to the Mirro Stage, see Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*.

⁷ My translation.

⁸ Author's emphasis.

⁹ Author's emphasis.

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