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Reading Funny Lipsticks through Jihad: The Politics of Feminism and Nationalism in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs

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**Author**

Tahani-Bidmeshki, Amy

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**Amy Tahani-Bidmeshki**  
**UCLA, Comparative Literature**  
**3<sup>rd</sup>-Year**

**Abstract:** In my paper, I explore the cross-sections of nationalism and feminism in the autobiographical text of Iranian-American writer Firoozeh Dumas. My interest focuses on the expressions of her political experiences within the discourses of nationalism and feminism and how her discussions of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 allow her to participate in “self-Orientalizing” while subscribing to the capitalist value system through demonstrations of being a “model immigrant.” By focusing on her choice of genre (the autobiography/memoir), I consider how her discussion of the Revolution and its consequences embraces liberal feminist ideals and therefore erases crucial elements of the progressive struggles in pre- and post Revolution Iran. The question then remains whether texts such as *Funny in Farsi* propagate misconceptions about Iranians and the Revolution and therefore function as sites of “human-made” disaster with repercussions for progressive possibilities in both the nationalist and feminist landscapes. Further, the recent explosion and popularity of Iranian-American women’s memoirs points to a limited view in the United States’ public sphere of a complex people and history without much regard for the progressive platform from which this dynamic and multifaceted revolution sprung nearly thirty years ago. One wonders then to what extent these texts help promote or encourage preexisting Orientalist views and attitudes towards Iran and the Middle East, especially since these writers such as Dumas stem from an upper-middle class background that embraces the values of the class-based system of the United States.

**Reading Funny Lipsticks through Jihad: The Politics of Feminism and Nationalism in Iranian-American Women’s Memoirs**

*Note: The following is an excerpt from a longer piece in which I look at the politics of feminism and nationalism in several Iranian-American women’s memoirs including Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azadeh Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad, and of course, Firoozeh Dumas’ Funny in Farsi.*

On the back cover of Firoozeh Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi*, the quip from the San Francisco Chronicle reads, “Remarkable...told with wry humor shorn of sentimentality...In the end, what sticks with the reader is an *exuberant immigrant embrace of America*” and the San Jose Mercury News boasts, “This book brings us closer to discovering what *it means to be an American.*” To these reviewers and the multitude of readers for whom this book is enjoyable, Iranian women are an oppressed group whose only hope for freedom and democracy rests in their access to the United States, both physically and ideologically, and Dumas celebrates this sentiment through one of the most effective universal motifs: humor. My contention is that Dumas not only perpetuates stereotypes about the allegedly oppressive conditions of Iran, but she also upholds

liberal bourgeois feminist values of independence thereby allowing the erasure of pertinent political and class issues of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. To borrow from Inderpal Grewal's important essay, "The discourse of 'freedom' is essential to the consolidation and ongoing construction of Western state power structures" (187) and this recent explosion of Iranian-American women's memoirs facilitates the North American/European colonial discourses in which the so-called Third World is ubiquitously oppressive, especially for women whereas the so-called First World stands as the site of freedom and democracy.

In "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making," Aihwa Ong cites Robert Park's assessment of the immigrant experience in which he says, "It is an interesting fact that as a first step in Americanization the immigrant does not become in the least American. *He simply ceases to be a provincial foreigner,*" (754). By pushing Park's envelope even further, Ong's analysis focuses on the East Asian immigrant's interactions with the established hegemony in the United States such that citizenship becomes a process of both subjugation and self-assertion, which Ong terms as "subject-ification" (737). Using Ong's useful critique of race and class in looking at *Funny in Farsi*, I would argue that Firoozeh Dumas participates in "self-making" by investing in liberal bourgeois feminism, which allows her to use self-Orientalizing techniques that promote the "dual process of *self-making* and *being-made* within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society," (738). More precisely, through the act of producing a memoir, which focuses predominantly on the conditions of Iranian life pre-1979 Islamic Revolution and post-1979, she transplants a rising middle-class consciousness in Iran to the "always-already" upwardly mobile consciousness of mainstream United States. She positions her narrative along the same economic and social trajectory that leads to exhibiting very specific middle-class status markers so that her "belonging" amidst Americans is predicated on the fact of her "productivity and consumption" (739). This is to say, this text exhibits a strong solidarity with liberal bourgeois American values

and her narrative reinforces sexist and racist notions emphatically imbued with a lack of class-consciousness.

To complicate her production even more, it seems to me that there is a desire to align so-called Iranian-ness with a specifically *American* Western-ness. Besides the fact that the text functions as an *apology* for the 1979 Revolution, especially with the American hostage situation, there is also a tangible effort to disassociate with other immigrant/national groups so that the Iranians' so-called whiteness can be clearly demarcated from the provincial foreigner's so-called blackness. Inevitably, she even discusses the difference between Arabs and Persians and hearkens back to the ancient glory of Persia to remind the Anglo-American audience of her close proximity to the Aryan brotherhood. The need to ruminate on the past versus the chador-clad present of Iran points to not only an economic urgency to disclaim any ties to the backward Middle East, but also to a universal connection to all white circles, including the "self-discipline and consumer power" (Ong 739) associated with whiteness. Most importantly, this sense of geopolitical (be)longing hardly begins once she is in the U.S.; as David Wu suggests, "the whitening of the American citizens does *not* begin in the *host* country" (emphasis added, 756). Since this process of Americanization starts *prior* to arrival, it becomes even more imperative to view this memoir as a testament to a particular desire to participate within the white, middle-class American sphere and in order to gain acceptance into this arena, Dumas uses liberal bourgeois feminist ideals vis-à-vis Orientalist storytelling, to affirm her incorporation into the mainstream of American society.

Unlike some other problematic texts written by and about Asian women such as *Jasmine* and *The Joy Luck Club*, Dumas's book is a memoir, not a work of fiction. This genre draws the reader in especially because of the intimacy created through the camaraderie of the humorous telling while conditioning the reader to accept the writing as factual since it is told from lived experience. Since this form of writing is not bound to any particular set of rules and structures, it

is more challenging to critique as the writer's *feelings cannot* and *should not* be debated.

Nonetheless, as factual storytelling, the memoir form points more directly to the writer's geopolitical and cultural affiliations and thus, one can question the underlying *motives* of this kind of production.

Dumas short and humorous text about her family's move from pre-Revolution Iran to the United States shows from early on that she and her family are invested in Western modes of conduct and more importantly, ideology while still *in* Iran. She says, "my father often spoke about America with the eloquence and wonder normally reserved for a first love. To him, America was a place where anyone, [...] could become an important person [...] It was the Promised Land," (3-4). She outlines from the start of her memoir that this is going to be the story of a model immigrant family; one that believes in the old American adage of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps." Dumas' family immigrated to the United States precisely because her father invested in the American Dream; hers is not a politically or socially ostracized family, but her father's working-class background "left him with a burning desire to get rich" (13). In typical model immigrant fashion, the young Dumas functioned as interpreter and translator for her parents while they participated in various aspects of popular culture including numerous trips to Disneyland, mealtimes at Kentucky Fried Chicken and Baskin-Robbins, and hours and hours of family time in front of the television. To some degree, their involvement in the mainstream arena defines American freedom albeit as opportunities to choose this or that fast-food restaurant or home-shopping item. The point in all of this is to say that Dumas never even recognizes the inherent problems of this value-system and indeed celebrates it.

The crux of Dumas' project in this text lies in her appeal to the reader that her family epitomizes the model immigrant family, which values liberal bourgeois ideals and which then allows her to engage in an apology of sorts for the anti-American sentiment of Revolutionary Iran. She even says that after the Iranian hostage situation, the thing that bothered her family the

most was that as Iranians, they were “among the most educated and successful immigrants in this country [and] nobody asked [their] opinion of whether the hostages should be taken,” (118). She continues that “our work ethic and obsession with education makes us almost *ideal* citizens [...and] for my father to be treated like a second-class citizen truly stung. If there were ever a poster child for immigration, it would be Kazem (her father),” (118). In essence then, Dumas aligns herself with Western ideas of subject formation by appealing to the dominant class’s notions of achievement and success while unilaterally ignoring the complex social and political circumstances that brought about the collapse of the Shah’s puppet regime. By this, I mean to say that in her choice to avoid even a marginal mention of the causes of the Islamic Revolution juxtaposed to her plea that her family be recognized as model immigrants, Dumas solidifies her role in the liberal bourgeois discourse by erasing the socio-economic struggles of the Iranians who recognized the injustice of blindly embracing Eurocentric colonial values and practices. She refuses to draw attention to the class battles that roused up the Revolution and instead charms her reader with her father’s insistence to participate in the voting system of the United States or her mother’s refusal to annunciate the sound of the letter “w.”

The most striking and problematic feature of the diasporic experience is the dominant culture’s overt demonstration of Edward Said’s notion of “Orientalism” and the eventual adoption of this Orientalism by the so-called ethnic groups. That is, as Said explains, historically speaking, Europe systematically infringed on the East such that “the Orient was almost a European invention” (1). Roughly speaking, post Renaissance eras reflect the “relationship between Occident and Orient [which is] a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5) and as a result of the East-West distinctions, “Orientalism is---and does not simply represent---a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture” (12). The ultimate result of this condition reveals itself, again, in the dichotomy for the

diasporic individual between choosing his/her geopolitical affiliations and harboring geospiritual (be)longing.

With this sentiment as the backdrop of the American scene, it is hardly a surprise to find various Anglo-Protestant “Others” also exhibiting the same Western Orientalist views thus, affirming a sense of cultural submission. As Said suggests, “After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, *books*, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States” begins to shade the thought and action patterns of all individuals within an orientalist society (6). In this light then, Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* stands out as an example of this notion because she uses “Orientalist” metaphors, language, symbols, and literal imagery to create a fiction that is nothing more than an appeasement and approval of the dominant, mainstream socioeconomic and cultural sentiment. For example, Dumas addresses the difficulty most Americans have with pronouncing non-Western names through metaphoric Orientalism. She says, “I believe this would be a richer country if all Americans could do a little tongue aerobics and learn to pronounce “kh,” or “gh” [...] It’s like adding a few new *spices* to the kitchen pantry. Move over, cinnamon and nutmeg, make way for cardamom and sumac,” (63). Even more disturbingly, she pacifies political oppositions by saying, “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 [...] Political difference would melt with every mouthful,” (75). Her constant avoidance of or lack of consciousness about vital socioeconomic and political issues dangerously erases their importance and instead *feeds* the oppressive liberal bourgeois machine.

This is not to say that Iranian culture is free from chauvinistic, patriarchal, and oppressive ideologies and practices but Dumas’ consistent reference to Orientalist images juxtaposed to her liberal bourgeois value system mark her as an Orientalist and danger to the heritage she comes from. Dumas uses methods that are acceptable in mainstream society to promote her inclusion in

the American scene without recognizing that she ultimately fails to relay an authentic Iranian American experience and in reality, remains on the margins of a culture that will usually judge by her national origins first. In effect then, by creating *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas only accomplishes “selling” her heritage to the American public as a literary soap opera.

When Said says that Orientalism is a “distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological” (12) facets of the present world condition, he also points to the fact that those individuals who fall on the Oriental side of the two halves of the world harbor a strong desire, both conscious and unconscious, to disassociate themselves with this Occidental Other. That is, oftentimes “ethnic” American groups, bear a sense of “apology” for their ethnic roots, which they value as less worthy of recognition in light of the dominant culture’s ideals and notions about their various sociopolitical ties. There is almost a literal shame about the connections the so-called ethnic American cannot deny about his/her ethnic roots, or geopolitical affiliations.

As David Leiwei Li suggests, the problem with relying on “an invariant universal” (123) in order to authenticate and reconcile the crisis of geopolitical consciousness and a desire for geospiritual (be)longing, is that the universalist approach:

“risks standardizing the different patterns of immigration, settlement, assimilation, and resistance, subordinating the multiple determinants of gender, generation, region, nationality, language, dialect, and class under racial consciousness, and finally precluding any hybrid cultural alternatives. (123)

Li’s words of caution for the “ethnic” intellectual’s efforts to bridge the gap of feelings of abjection and pride through an erasure of historical facts, whether enacted through a denial of various events and experiences or an over-exaggeration of those same historical moments, also take into account the danger of becoming an “Occidental Orientalist” of sorts.



Given the historical, social, economic, political, and cultural experiences of the ethnic American, how should the chasm of geopolitical awareness and geospiritual (be)longing be reconciled without risking the dangers of becoming a cultural essentialist or Western Orientalist? Is there any way to authenticate the experiences of an ethnic diaspora while avoiding complacency with the dominant culture's ideals and imperialist leanings? Said and Li offer poignant and pertinent insights into the constructions of geopolitical tensions and desires for a spiritual connection to a lost heritage even though at times they also seem to demonstrate "alter-essentialism" and Western imperialist ideological approval (although this assertion is indeed a large stretch of this idea). The difficulty with balancing the scales of abjection and adoration of the self seems to be the unavoidable pigeon-holing of oneself in one of the two camps. The most outstanding issue in Dumas' attempt to reconcile a torn sense of the self is that in her effort to authenticate the Iranian American experience, she never takes a diasporic view of the circumstances. Once an ethnic American takes on the Herculean task of questioning his/her roots and sense of identity in relation to his/her geopolitical awareness and geospiritual (be)longing, s/he must remain accountable in staying free from giving into the dominant culture's ideas of his/her legitimacy as an American and maybe, these issues aren't so funny?

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