

# Iranian Women in the Memoir



# Iranian Women in the Memoir:

*Comparing* Reading Lolita  
in Tehran *and* Persepolis (1)  
*and* (2)

By

Emira Derbel

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To my family for their love and encouragement.

To my husband for his unlimited support.

To the soul of my grandmother who accompanied all my steps in writing this project without witnessing it's coming to light.



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## INTRODUCTION

The writing of autobiography by women has grown remarkably into a territory distinct from male autobiographers. Women's autobiographical writing, rarely taken seriously as Buss puts it in *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*, has garnered an avalanche of criticism, wavering from discontent to bewilderment, to challenge the courage of its authors (2002, 6). Following the same line of thought, Leigh Gilmore in *Autographics* stresses the exclusionary tendency of traditional autobiographical studies that renders the discussion of gender a mere supplement (1994, 21). However, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that "women's autobiography is a privileged site for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, post-colonial, and postmodern critical theories" (2002, 5). Women's life narratives are symbolic endeavors to break the wall of silence imposed on them by their historical and cultural heritage.

However, autobiographical theorists such as George Gusdorf identified autobiography as essentially a Western male narrative representative of great men, and there was little interest in women's autobiographies until the end of the seventies (1980, 32). Around the 1980s, however, many critics brought the significance of women's autobiographies to light. For instance, Estelle C. Jelinek stresses the need to explore women's autobiographies via, "historical, social psychological and ethnic analysis," which requires a "gendered reading" of the genre as a reaction against the exclusionary Western androcentric conceptualization of autobiography (Miller 2015, 259).

The subject/self in autobiographical writing is no longer removed from the historical, social, and political context. Instead, it gained flexibility and space at the foreground of literary criticism. The autobiographical "I" ceased to hide itself behind a masculine linguistic and social curtain. The construction of their own space within feminist criticism as active women subjects marked a turning point in feminist studies and autobiography. Women autobiographers, as Smith and Watson argue, "had challenged the gender ideologies surrounding them in order to script their life narratives" (2010, 12).

The focus has thus shifted to embrace a relational multi-voiced narrative instead of a solitary male self. The story is not of a single subject, but

representative of a collectivity of women's stories through the voice of the female narrator. It is this collectivity, or what Bakhtin terms the "heteroglossic" aspect of women's autobiography, that was a source of empowerment for women autobiographers (1981, 352). In the wake of post-colonialism and postmodernism, many scholars have diverted their attention toward non-Western women's autobiographies. This newly liberated approach paved the way toward the emergence of ethnic women's autobiographies, including African- and Iranian-Americans using various forms, such as memoirs, testimonies, diaries, or even graphic memoirs. This boom in life narratives led Paul Eakin in *How Our Lives Become Stories* to state, "[The] serious and sustained study of women's autobiography . . . is the single most important achievement of autobiography studies in the last decade" (1999, 65).

Autobiographical writing marked a tremendous outburst of activity, mainly because of the positive reception of memoirs by a large readership. As part of this literary phenomenon, despite its long history of marginalization, the memoir form regained its place in autobiographical writing because it provided, "immediacy and more authentic truth into life narrative" (2007, 133). Memoirs by Iranian women in the diaspora have become particularly popular because they contextualize the personal with the historical. The memoir form offers accessibility to a prohibited space in Iranian culture. As a symbolic form of unveiling the self, the Iranian memoir offers its women writers the potential to transgress and transcend forbidden ground.

Prior to the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian artistic field was dominated by an inclination to protect and hide the private life of women from the public. As Farzaneh Milani contends, Iranian culture, "creates, expects and even values a sharply defined separation between the inner and the outer, the private and the public" (1990, 2). Patriarchy, or the law of the father, is also one of the reasons that burdens Iranian women writers enmeshed in an ongoing war against silence, subservience, public humiliation, and the media, because they stepped across the threshold of artistic production by writing memoirs.

The writing of memoirs by Iranian women comprises a personal and historical dynamic. On one hand, they represent Iran at a crucial historical juncture as the country transitions from a monarchy to an Islamic government. On the other hand, the memoir historicizes the personal experiences of Iranian women torn between a yearned-for freedom and an Islamic life imposed by the new regime. The memoirs create narratives of trauma and courage, and invent new female subjectivities. In fact, "they open up a space for a gendered discourse about Iran and the Islamic

Republic” (Whitlock 2008, 8). In post-revolutionary Iran, Iranian memoirs produce a discursivity that documents historical changes and sheds light on the intractable issues of identity, sexuality, ethnicity, and class—both in Iran and in exile.

Described by Gillian Whitlock as “Soft Weapons,” Iranian memoirs have attracted an antagonistic reception (2007, 3). Being literary weapons for divulging the social, cultural, and political contradictions haunting the lives of the Iranian women, Iranian life narratives could not escape categorization as an exotic secondary version of colonialism. Thus, Iranian women face a double challenge; their role transcends the simple cadre of diasporic literary production. They seek to excavate the hidden voices of Iranian women and resist an inherited patriarchal heritage via the reconstruction of a new model of womanhood, and exhibit an urge to abate the widespread association of Islam with terror, and Muslims with extremists.

The two best-selling Iranian memoirs, Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (hereafter *RLT*) and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (1) and (2), (hereafter *Persepolis*) have garnered unprecedented fame for their capacity to offer daring glimpses into the Iranian female and unravel contradictory discourses invading women’s lives in post-revolutionary Iran. Nafisi’s narrative memoir and Satrapi’s graphic *oeuvre* are generically different forms of writing the female self and re-inscribing her voice into the discourses of history, politics, religion, and culture. This study of the memoirs, which will compare and contrast the authors’ respective uses of the genre, will shed light on the originality of narrating women’s stories through Western literature in *RLT*, and the originality of *Persepolis*, which uses the previously marginalized medium of comics to graphically depict female subjectivity at the intersection of history and religion.

Iranian diasporic memoirs, mainly those written in the US, have been subject to an avalanche of criticism for various reasons. *RLT* is considered the most controversial Iranian-American memoir, which is both shocking and fascinating. On one hand, Nafisi’s memoir awakens in Hamid Dabashi and Fatemeh Keshavarz wariness for its alliance with colonial tropes that dispossess Iranian women of their agency (2006, 2-3). On the other hand, it garners the praise and fascination of some critics who perceive Nafisi’s engagement with the private side of women, or even her obsession with the veil, as an attempt to “show something real by lifting the veil off Iranian women’s lives” (Darznik 2008, 57).

In *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran*, Keshavarz categorizes Nafisi’s memoir as an “example of the New Orientalist narrative” (2007, 2). Keshavarz criticizes *RLT* for its tendency to serve the

Orientalist duality of an American civilized “us” trying to help weak and humble oppressed Iranian women that belong to the backward realm of “them.” In an interview at the University of North Carolina in spring 2007, Keshavarz claims, “the greatest omission in the content of Nafisi’s book is that it overlooks the agency and presence of Iranian women in the social and intellectual domain” (Motlagh 2011, 415). Keshavarz’s criticism of *RLT* is ironic because the book’s main claim is to tell the untold story of women in post-revolutionary Iran.

Dabashi, another well-known critic of *RLT*, ferociously condemned the memoir in his article “Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire” in the *AL-Harem Weekly* reducing it to “a colonial project” driven by a “colonial agent” (2006, 3). As far as Nafisi’s representation of the female body in *RLT* is concerned, Dabashi adds that “[the female body is used as] a site of political contestation between two modes of ideological fanaticism by Islamists and anti-Islamists alike, one insisting on veiling and the other on unveiling it” (2006, 4).

In “Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,” Peter Kramer comments on the stereotypical Western equation between the veil and women’s oppression as follows, “A glimmer of hope attaches to the way bright clothing emerges in a private room, once the prescribed robes and scarves are removed. The regime maintains its hegemony first through the repression of women” (2003, 22-52). Anne Donadey and Ahmed-Gosh critically point to Nafisi’s silence “about the advances women and women’s group have made in Iran since the 1980s” (2008, 629). By ignoring this historical detail, Nafisi indirectly supports, “Western stereotypes of Iranian women as passive and helpless” (Donadey and Ahmed-Gosh 2008, 629). Furthermore, the way *RLT* celebrates the US fashion of the social book club further situates the memoir as appealing to a strictly Western readership. However, Cassius Peck, remarks:

none of the women in Nafisi’s class fits the American stereotype of Iranians as being either religious zealots wholly committed to the regime or irreligious hedonists aping pious behaviors because the mullahs force them to. Nafisi’s students represent seven different attitudes toward Islam, toward the regime, and toward the future (59).

In this context, Robert Birnbaum notes, “Nafisi’s memoir does break some stereotypes of Muslim women” (Identity Theory.com). In fact, the memoir disengages Iranian women from the traditional Eastern stereotype of subservience and passivity. Moreover, it symbolically unveils their private lives and motivates each of the girls to voice their stories. Nafisi focuses on the uniqueness and the centrality of Iranian women’s

independent subjectivities, which explains her repetitive statement “that she values rebellion over revolution [for its transgressive aspect] in a context of a totalitarian revolutionary regime” (Donadey and Ahmed-Gosh 2008, 636).

Many reviewers praised Nafisi as a writer and lover of books. For example, Cheryl Miller of the *Policy Review* claims, “Nafisi is one of the most eloquent advocates of the written word to date. Every page of Nafisi’s memoir is informed by her passion for literature and for teaching” (2003, 94). Daniel Grassian criticized Dabashi and Keshavarz’s attacks against Nafisi by arguing they “can end up further silencing women who are already being silenced by the regime, and inadvertently defend problematic politics of the regime that can often and do infringe on basic human rights, especially for women” (2013, 97). Furthermore, it is only through criticizing existent patterns of oppression that the silenced other can free herself from muteness.

Other critics consider *Persepolis* a successful graphic novel for its choice of a medium that illustrates traumatic experience through a comic and humoristic style, thus making it a distinguished memoir. For instance, in “An Iranian Girlhood,” Andrew Arnold states:

*Persepolis* provides a unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life. It has the strange quality of a note in a bottle written by a shipwrecked islander. That Satrapi chose to tell her remarkable story as a gorgeous comic book makes *Persepolis* unique and indispensable. The humor of the characters’ comments strengthens the political dimension that looms large in the (memoir). Both the visual and the narrative spaces combine the comic dimension with a serious traumatic tone. (2012)

In fact, Debbie Notkin in “Growing Up Graphic,” says, “Satrapi’s humor pervades her memoir just as it might pervade a prose work on a similar subject. None of the humor is without its pointed commentary, which often only makes it funnier” (2003, 8). Notkin also comments on the empowering format of the graphic novel because it is visually revelatory of the memoirist’s feelings and experiences. In addition, the comic dimension frames women’s representation by subverting the common duality that posits the superior male gaze (2003, 10). In “Kaleidoscope Eyes: Geography, Gender, and the Media,” Christina E. Dando claims, “Satrapi’s foray into graphic novels represents one way women shift from the object of the gaze to creators of the gaze, creating works that communicate their view” (2007, 18).

*Persepolis*, therefore, communicates the view of the female protagonist to the outside world and focuses on issues related to the female body, life,

and marriage in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. According to Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley, the memoir has "...force[d] the Western reader to work hard to understand the complexities of contemporary Iranian politics and social dynamics" (2005, 225). Furthermore, *Persepolis* exemplifies Iran's historical and social reality and condemns the harsh reality of the treatment of its women.

Many studies accompanied the proliferation of Iranian memoirs and analyze numerous issues such as female agency through the recovery of the past or even criticize the theological dogmatism of the Islamic Revolution. However, they tackled these issues through narrative or selected memoirs such as *Persepolis*. For this reason, conducting a comparative study between *RLT* and *Persepolis* will be useful. It is worth pointing out that despite many critical acclaims that found the comparison between Nafisi's *RLT* and Satrapi's *Persepolis* a favorable one, the field did not witness the emergence of a study that clearly and directly compares both memoirs. Hence, this book comes to fill in the gap. This comparative investigation will reveal how two Iranian memoirs, different in form, create a common platform to break through imposed mechanisms of power, make women's voices heard, free their bodies from holy sanctions, and empower their identities as a process of renewal and becoming.

In 1979, The Iranian Revolution constituted a traumatic break in the national imagination, a break that paradoxically engendered productive possibilities for women's subjectivities, which have manifested themselves through the explosion of diasporic Iranian women's memoirs since 1999. This study seeks to explore the various reasons behind the elevation of the memoir, previously considered a trivial form of life writing, to what is now the most elevated form that reflects women's lives.

This flourishing trend in women's writing tends to portray the revolution as an individual and collective trauma, colored by powerful nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary era. Through the comparative investigation of Nafisi's *RLT* and Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the book aims to examine how narrative and graphic memoirs open the way for Iranian women to reclaim new territory through various mechanisms of transgressions that evade social, religious, and political trauma in post-revolutionary Iran. Furthermore, the study seeks to turn territorial and psychological exile into an empowering space whereby Iranian women memoirists indulge in a journey to recover the past, not as a weakening process, but as a therapeutically healing stratagem.

Additionally, generic differences between *RLT* and *Persepolis* offer a fertile ground for exploring how both women memoirists tackled feminist



issues via narrative and graphic techniques. The book also intends to dispute the New Orientalist vision within which Nafisi's *RLT* has been misread as a memoir that enforces stereotypes of Iranian women as "passive, masochistic victims" (Keshavarz 2007, 9). In order to dispute these misreadings, this book seeks to foreground Nafisi's representation of Iranian women in the memoir not as merely victims of a new theological order, but as active participants in creating a means to evade and subvert the Islamic Republic's oppressive policies. Hence, this study intends to illustrate the capacity of both memoirs to reconstruct a new model of Iranian womanhood that collapses the widespread depiction of Eastern women as passive and oppressed.

In addition, the study explores the liberating power of literature because it offers female writers and protagonists an additional space from which to criticize various modes of control and transcend them. This liberating power is attained through the memoir form as a bearer of women's empowerment, and, in particular, through the authorial deployment of two main literary devices: the comic medium of *Persepolis* and the intertextuality of *RLT*.

Azar Nafisi's *RLT* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* will be the focus of this comparative study as they exemplify narrative and graphic memoirs, respectively. The choice of comparing two generically and stylistically different memoirs stems from a lack of critical attention in the literature. In fact, *RLT* has been categorized by Naghibi and O'Malley as "the antithesis of *Persepolis*" (2005, 224). In "From Tehran to Tehrangeles: The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs," Gillian Whitlock describes *Persepolis* and *RLT* as "very different bestsellers" (2006, 11). However, Whitlock suggests the possibility of obtaining a fruitful comparison between *RLT* and Satrapi's *Embroideries* as the critic considers it as a "supplement" to the *Persepolis* duet (2008, 19). This possible comparative ground, according to Whitlock, stems from both memoirs opening with a "women's room" in Tehran in the early 1990s and their exploration of relationships among women (2008, 19). Whitlock, however, fails to perceive that though the events in *Persepolis* do not initiate in a closed space as in *RLT*, they still share with the latter a common historical and thematic dimension interestingly disturbed by a generic difference that further stimulates extra platforms for comparison. In "Autographics," however, Whitlock underlines the possibility of comparing the way both memoirs represent the identity of Iranian women (2006, 973). This book seeks to explore both similarities and differences while shedding light on the empowering form of the memoir as it grants voice and visibility to Iranian women.

The entwining of private and public memory through revolutionary trauma frames Nafisi and Satrapi's nostalgic recollections of Iran. According to Smith and Watson, both memoirs capture a dynamic postmodernism in their movement between "the private and the public, subject and object" (2010, 220). *RLT* and *Persepolis* are not "self-referential narratives" because they foreground the personal and include the social and political dimensions (2010, 216). Hence, "relationality" is one of the main techniques employed in this study that frames the relations between all Iranian women using narrative and graphic mediums, and attributes strength and agency over passivity and subservience (Friedman, 1989, 72).

The study draws its originality from exploring the shared thematic dimension of both memoirs despite their generic differences. In addition, this investigation disputes the claim that Nafisi's *RLT* is "only a half-hearted attempt to produce a study of women's history in Iran" or a propagator of the American interference policy (Naghbi and O'Malley 2005, 225). If Nafisi's memoir was grounded on the Western book club tradition, that claim would not necessarily diminish the memoir as a dissident narrative on Iranian women's oppression in the Islamic Republic. Both memoirs' reliance on Western mediums to tackle women's issues in post-revolutionary Iran, such as the graphic comic book or the book club, renders the study more interesting. The hybrid nature of the graphic memoir and the intertextual references to various Western novels in *RLT* offer a broad scope for both authors to alleviate the somber reality of Iranian women.

## Rationale

The choice of reading *RLT* or *Persepolis* stems from various reasons. In addition to the fertile ground offered by the narrative and graphic genre of memoir writing, and the potential of the memoir to reveal the hypocrisy of the male-centered interpretation of Sharia Law, the memoirs serve to counter critics of the recent flourishing of Iranian-feminist writings. The comparison between a narrative memoir and a graphic one is new in its way of displaying the same experience of exile, displacement, and characters' alienation, but through two different mediums, one narrative and the other graphic. Furthermore, the choice of the graphic memoir was nourished by the strong impact that the picture tends to leave on the reader/viewer as compared to the narrative memoir.

The second reason behind the choice of these two feminists' memoirs is their power to give agency and identity to the female voice, freeing it

from religious and social dogmatism. Because religious and political oppression can only yield a handicapped society where women would be its first victims, working on these two memoirs will unveil the hypocrisy of the hegemonic male-centered interpretation of Sharia Law and how this victimizes society and weakens its dynamism.

For example, the choice of the memoir aims to subvert what Farzaneh Milani asserts in *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, that the memoir is “a form of metaphysical unveiling as indecorous as physical unveiling” (6). This assumption will only empower patriarchal discourse by weakening the potency of feminists’ memoirs. Contrary to this claim, *RLT* and *Persepolis* unveil the voice of women doomed to hide behind society’s fervent obsessions and defy Iranian culture.

Furthermore, the worldwide attention garnered by these memoirs is another factor in the selection of these titles. *RLT* and *Persepolis* accumulated heated debates among critics such as Hillary Chute, Naghibi, and O’Malley and Whitlock concerning the possibility of exploring the differences between both *oeuvres*. However, as revealed by the literature review, no study has made a comparative investigation between two generically distinct memoirs, that deal thematically with the reality facing Iranian women in post-revolutionary Iran—an omission this book seeks to address by exploring the generic and thematic differences and similarities between a narrative and a graphic memoir.

Through its four chapters, this book studies the potential of narrative and graphic memoirs to invent new territories for Iranian women writers to map a different model of womanhood. The comparative study between *RLT* and *Persepolis* points to the various mechanisms both memoirs rely upon to challenge the existing curtailment of women in post-revolutionary Iran.

The first chapter deals with delineating the difference between memoir and autobiography. The role of memoir as a flourishing genre among exiled Iranian women writers has reinvented and reworked the traditional nature of autobiography that privileged a universal Western subjectivity, usually male. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have argued that in “traditional Western autobiography, the subject of autobiography the ‘I’ becomes ‘Man,’ putatively a marker of the universal human subject whose essence remains outside the vagaries of history” (1992, xvii). In the case of *Persepolis* and *RLT*, both female writers transgress the boundaries of the male-centered “I.” Instead, they relocate the female voice as the only recognizable source of cultural, historical, and political knowledge.

The first chapter of the book also sheds light on the reasons for my choice of the term “memoir” instead of “autobiography.” Contrary to the tendency in autobiographical writing to privilege “the self [or] individual as autonomous sovereign self” entrenched within the socio-political dimension, “memoir,” as a term, tends, in the new postmodern/post-colonial context, to examine socio-political contexts (Buss 2002, 32). In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Smith and Watson argue, “Many post-modern and post-colonial theorists contend that the term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life writing not only in the West but around the globe” (2010, 3). Hence, the memoir has gained currency with the public and in critical discourse.

As Nancy Miller argues, “memoir is the record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in the Postmodern world” (1994, 14). Satrapi and Nafisi’s memoirs reflect a plurality of selves through the creative inclusion of other Iranian women in telling their stories. As a genre in vogue, memoirs trespass on other genres of life narrative because what was deemed personal in the style of Virginia Woolf’s *Room of One’s Own* is now public (Buss 2002, 64). For Nafisi, the motif of a room is not just a place for herself, but a secure *échappatoire* for seven of her successful female students. It is the space where the personal collides with public, religious, and political dimensions. Therefore, Miller argues that the memoir captures a dynamic postmodernism in its movement between the “private and the public, subject and object” (1994, 12).

As noted, the chapter also seeks to delineate the characteristic features and generic differences between narrative and graphic memoirs. A groundbreaking difference, for instance, between the graphic and traditional memoir lies in the degree of a reader’s involvement during the process of meaning resolution and historical analysis. Critics of comics affirm that the reader/viewer plays a greater role in interpreting the graphic form as opposed to the narrative. While Charles Hatfield and Will Eisner stress the independency of the image as an indicator of meaning and a controller of the reader’s imagination (2005, 29), Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen argue that comics require more interpretation than prose (1994, 28).

In fact, the reader plays an essential role in reading beyond the panels, in the gutters where meaning awaits further exploration to seek “closure” (McCloud 1994, 90). Following the same line of thought, scholars of autobiography, such as Chute and Whitlock, respectively point to the hybridity of the graphic memoir that obliges the reader to play an effective role (2010, 27; 2006, 976). The reader is not only a meaning finder, but

also a witness to the traumatic events. The degree of the writer/narrator's dynamism is also one of the central differences (Groensteen 2007, 21). While Marji inscribes performance, dynamism, and directness because of the additional power of the comic strip, Nafisi remains restricted to the telling and the description of the room, the photos, and the female characters that form the backbone of the narrative.

Despite the generic gap between traditional and graphic memoirs, both autobiographical forms allocate "a distinctive space for autobiographical writing. As a meta-textual account, [memoir is] a reflection on the self in process and in history" (Buss 2002, 133). Consequently, the final part of the first chapter will concentrate on the issue of witnessing the past as the main trajectory toward the recalling of trauma and the transgression of such events.

The second chapter investigates and analyzes the mechanisms of female transgressions in both memoirs. This seeks to explore the importance of reinterpreting the past as an empowering act reflecting Iranian women's struggle against imposed silence and invisibility. The retrieval of trauma differs according to the form of the memoir. The analysis will also shed light on techniques deployed by both narrators to recall traumatic incidents, such as the burning of the Rex Cinema or bombing and executions. In *RLT* and *Persepolis*, the act of telling inevitably implies, in Daniel Schacter's view, a remembering or recording of "how we experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves" (1996, 9). The chapter dwells on the graphic and narrative methods deployed by both narrators in the process of recalling the past, such as flashbacks and panel backgrounds.

The transcendence of trauma is achievable due to the important role literature plays in the act of expressing past events. Literature, therefore, enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known, and opens us to experiences that might have otherwise been silenced. According to Dominick LaCapra, "many commentators would agree with Caruth in thinking that the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma" (2004, 190). The chapter will also demonstrate how literature has a crucial role to play in the age of historical traumas, as Felman puts it, to bring "literary justice" (2002, 8).

Transcending a traumatic event necessitates the study of space as both the locus of oppression and liberation. While the lived or the public social space remains subjected to power and ideology, the private space creates modes of transgression. As opposed to the narrative text, the comic becomes a third space where the narrator/illustrator visualizes the transcendence of the female subject to dismantle mechanisms of oppression imposed on

Iranian women. The space of the comic offers the avatar Marji, and the other Iranian women characters, the opportunity to visualize a reinvention of female identity. The narrative space, however, relies on imagination to construct alternative spaces. Nevertheless, in both memoirs, the public domain remains a site of possible transgression that paves the way toward the reinvention of an alternative model of Iranian womanhood.

Amidst this limiting atmosphere, the narrators do not refrain from inventing various methods of transgression, where irony proves highly subversive. This aspect will concentrate on the gap between the “said” and the “unsaid,” not merely as a semantic tool, because it also proves to be, as Haraway explains, “a rhetorical strategy and a political method” that deconstructs and decenters patriarchal discourses (Hutcheon 1994, 30). Therefore, a close study of irony in *RLT* and *Persepolis* is enlightening in the way it functions in parallel with humor as a counter-discourse that revisits and transgresses existent discourses of power as imposed on Iranian women in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. Hutcheon affirms that irony happens within discourse; therefore, it cannot be separated from “the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution” (1994, 17).

Nafisi and Satrapi resort to humorous irony to draw a bearable picture of an unbearable experience, and both would not deny the importance of “social interaction.” In *RLT* and *Persepolis*, Satrapi and Nafisi construct two parallel worlds: the macro space of the Islamic Republic and its social and ideological aftermath on the female narrators, and the micro space of family and friends with whom the burden of change has become bearable. In order to make sense of the changes brought to their public and private spaces, Nafisi and Satrapi recreate their own models to make the newly imposed order a livable space. Their newly created world is shaped by their stories and the stories of other women who played a crucial role in communicating textual and visual depictions of female oppression in Iran.

Autobiographical narrative is not a solitary story, but relational; it proposes, according to Eakin, not only “the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other” (1992, 58). Accordingly, the narrator self in memoir, or other forms of life writing, cannot make the story in isolation from the stories of others. In fact, all the characters’ stories together with the narrator’s are what constitute the narrative. Relationality in life writing is “narratively incorporated” through what Bakhtin terms “heteroglossic dialogism,”<sup>1</sup> that is, the multiplicity of

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1. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept points to the importance of language registers and how language is dialogic because it implies

“tongues” or the polyvocality through which subjectivity is enunciated (1986, 392).

Accordingly, the second chapter pinpoints the multiplicity of female voices or storytellers as revelators of Iranian women’s experiences in revolutionary Iran. It focuses on the dialogic aspect of both memoirs in the way they construct female communities through storytelling and relationality. In both memoirs, storytelling proves to be empowering and liberating since it gave Marji in *Persepolis*, and the narrator and her female students in *RLT*, the courage to manipulate the rules of the Islamic government. The dialogic aspect of both memoirs is strengthened via relational selves who create a bond of sisterhood, an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s terminology (1983, 48), that was eager to break the shackles imposed on them by the state.

The first part of the third chapter examines the dual meaning of exile as an alienating experience and a process of becoming. Iranian women memoirists share a common exilic experience that I consider both alienating and fulfilling. Despite its crippling aspect, exile creates territories for artistic achievement. Exile becomes, as Said puts it in “Reflections on Exile”, a “potent and enriching motif in modern culture” (2000, 142). The exilic experience is indeed inspirational for the vast majority of Iranian women writers, whose memoirs have recently attracted significant critical attention.

In this chapter, I seek to configure a positive notion of exile that transcends the crippling nature of displacement to embrace exile as a source of “euphoric possibilities driven by a desire for liberation and freedom” (Naficy 2004, 6). Therefore, the study illustrates, as opposed to Edward Said in his essay “Reflections on Exile”, “the capacity of exile to serve ‘notions of humanism’” (2000, 138). In the same essay, Said contends that exilic writers should map “territories of experience” beyond those mapped by the literature of exile (2000, 139). Accordingly, the exilic writer should prioritize the concrete and tangible human experience of exile. As Said states in “Reflections on Exile”, the literary work of the exilic writer should explore the miseries of the refugee and the masses whose “undocumented” suffering deepens their loss (2000, 139). Fictional territories need substitution by reality to alleviate the plight of the exile.

The writing of memoirs by Iranian women imitates the quotidian experiences of women who suffer internal exile and psychological displacement under the totalitarian umbrella of a theological regime.

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interaction between many individuals or social groups. Hence, it is inevitably heteroglossic because it combines various discourses (292).

Furthermore, Nafisi and Satrapi allocate space to depict their exilic conditions in Austria and the US respectively. Both memoirs are therefore, prominent exemplifications of human experience as “unproblematically real and readable captured transparently in language expressing the truth of experience” (Smith and Watson 1998, 9). Hence, exile is a potent and enriching experience that allows Nafisi and Satrapi to tackle humane issues related to the curtailment of women’s rights in post-revolutionary Iran. Literature, then, becomes an empowering medium and not merely a fictional territory.

Focus will also be directed to the concept of “liminality” or “in-betweenness” as pioneered by Victor Turner (*The Ritual*) and later revisited by Hamid Naficy (*Exile Culture*) and Homi Bhabha (*The Location*), not as an end in itself, but rather as a process and becoming of an identity that transcends a single context. The issue of the exile’s identity is crucial in this chapter since I oppose Naficy’s view that the subject “lives a period of in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent crowned by a final incorporation into the dominant host country” (1993, xvi).

Naficy holds a utopian image of the exile’s condition, since assimilation within an alien culture is never complete or finalized (1993, xvi). Additionally, Naficy’s vision tries to dismantle the idea of multiple positioning that an exilic subject is likely to occupy in a foreign culture. However, liminality, as Hall (“Cultural Identity”) and Bhabha (*The Location*) argue, necessitates the continuous crossing of two culturally divergent landscapes, because this crossing is instrumental in constructing the exile’s cultural identity. The sense of living in at least two cultures remains the essence of life for people who have experienced forced or voluntary displacement. Multiple positioning, therefore, is a permanent part of exilic life because, as demonstrated in this part of the chapter, identity is not a closed form, but resists fixity.

The question of home is also central in the writing of memoirs. Therefore, chapter three also explores the different relations between the exilic subject and home, firstly as a myth—an imaginary ground constructed through memory—then as a physically tangible space. In *RLT* and *Persepolis*, home is a place from which the authors physically depart, yet mentally return to in their creative work. The notion of home wavers between feelings of phobia and nostalgia. Fear is motivated by the regime’s harassment and the restrictions imposed on the narrators and all Iranian women in the Islamic Republic. Hence, exile is represented in my work as both internal and external, and voluntary and involuntary. These occurrences of exile explain my usage of Bhabha’s concept of the



“unhomely” in dealing with the issue of home (2004, 13). This contrast of several “homes,” the real home as remembered, and the physical one now inhabited, exhibits notions of memory by exiled writers.

The construction of an Iranian hybrid identity is a central part of the third chapter as a result of the multiple processes of “deterritorialization” performed by the exiled subject inside and outside her home country (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 36). Since the context of these memoirs forcibly conveys the experience of a female subject characterized by a continuous wavering back and forth to different territories, home and exile, the private and the public, identity is thought of as “multiple and as contextual, contested, and contingent” (Scott 1992, 36). The chapter argues that identity, as subjectivity, is an unstable entity, at least partly determined through cultural norms and discourses. Identity is, therefore, the product of the subject’s performance both in exile and in her home country.

The chapter draws on Judith Butler’s concept of performativity to argue this, reinforcing the liminal status of the subject who oscillates between imposed social norms and imported cultural traits (1993, 68). However, performativity also pushes the female subject into hybridity and the construction of a third space that allows Iranian women transgression and liberation from restrictive theological rules. Hence, *RLT* and *Persepolis* (1) and (2), as two examples of cultural production, offer a third space in the form of the narrative and the graphic. Here, Nafisi and Satrapi construct a hybrid form that represents, provides commentary on, and challenges life in Iran. As George Steiner observes, the text has become “a home and an instrument of exilic survival” (Milani 2003, 1).

The fourth chapter elucidates the conflicting relations between the discourse of power propagated by the religious and political institutions of the Islamic Republic and the construction of the female body and sexuality in *RLT* and *Persepolis*. It also seeks to foreground mechanisms of resistance deployed by Nafisi and to subvert the monolithic essentialist identity imposed on Iranian women in post-revolutionary Iran by attributing an ironic significance to veiling, not as a means of suffocation, but a symbol of transgression. Thus, transcendence occurs through the act of writing, which transforms itself into a form of social and personal unveiling.

The discrepancy between pre-revolutionary promises and the Islamic government’s betrayal of its exemplary model of life engendered a demeaning gender discourse. Islamization resulted in the veiling of its women’s bodies. Therefore, this chapter seeks to highlight the propagation of Islamic discourse through the deployment of power, surveillance, and

mechanisms to regulate women's most private domains—their bodies and their sexuality. *RLT* and *Persepolis* offer critical insight into the daily reality of Iranian women whose lives are characterized by institutionalized domination. Both memoirs share a common thirst for unveiling the socio-political power and religious ideologies that pervade and regulate gender identity. Therefore, I consider Michel Foucault's connection between gender and power highly relevant as it holds the body as the primary site of "very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations," a transformation Foucault calls "docile bodies" (Foucault 1984, 182).

The representation of Iranian women's bodies and sexuality in recent memoirs further strengthens the link between regimes of power, such as the politico-historical discourse of the Islamic Republic, and the female body as a visible target of this discourse. Both the graphic and narrative media represent how an Iranian woman's identity is subjected to repressive effects of regulatory force. This "regulatory ideal" in Foucault's terminology (Foucault 1984), serves to control the body it produces, and as Judith Butler observes, "works in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies" (1993, 2). The category of male or female is produced via a repeated or reiterative act, what Butler calls "performativity" (1993, 2). Both memoirs illustrate gender identity as constructed through imposed sets of behavior dictated by the new theological order.

This representation of Iranian women, however, is not devoid of mechanisms for resistance to disciplinary practices or regulatory forces. Chapter four will therefore demonstrate that Iranian women's bodies are not captive to the docility engendered by various mechanisms of control. On the contrary, both memoirs include a wide array of strategies of resistance that dismantle the pervasive discourses of manipulation that impinge on women a monolithic model of womanhood based on the performance of a fixed gender identity. Nafisi and Satrapi introduce tactics that disturb the set routine of daily female behavior.

The chapter also foregrounds mechanisms of resistance deployed by Nafisi and Satrapi to subvert the monolithic essentialist identity imposed on Iranian women in post-revolutionary Iran by attributing a different significance to veiling, not as a means of suffocation, but as a symbol of transgression. As noted, transcendence occurs through the act of writing, which turns itself into a form of social and personal unveiling. The compulsory veiling of heads is opposed by an unveiling of minds via the act of life narrative. The chapter exposes the multiple significance of the veil as a religious and political concept. As Nafisi observes, it has turned

women who wear the veil into “political signs and symbols” (2004, 165). The chapter also sheds light on the intricate relation between identity and veiling. At this level, the comic resonates more than the narrative script for its ability to unsettle stereotypes through a rebellious self already unveiled through the act of putting the body on the page. Graphic representation transgresses the written text.

In the final part of the fourth chapter, I demonstrate that both memoirs portray a different model of womanhood. Satrapi and Nafisi transform the image of victimhood and the entrapment of Iranian women to justify the spread of what Milani calls “hostage narratives” (2013, 130). Despite the avalanche of criticism of Nafisi’s *RLT*, the memoir offers an alternative image of Iranian woman. I conclude by opposing the Orientalist or neo-conservative school by which Nafisi has been accused by critics including Hamid Dabashi (*Al-Ahram Weekly*) of demonstrating that Iranian scholars should not replicate norms of restrictions on Iranian women memoirists. Furthermore, I conclude that the literary field, whether narrative or graphic, remains an open territory for the contestation of newer models of womanhood.

## Theoretical Framework

Autobiographical writing witnessed a vibrant resurgence of interest in the lives of women. Although women have written autobiographies, diaries, and memoirs for many centuries, critics such as Georges Gusdorf, Georg Misch and William Spengemann<sup>2</sup> limited their focus to male subjects. Many critics now consider women’s autobiography a fruitful ground of study because it fosters an interest in women’s life stories and excavates hidden voices. The theoretical framework of this work makes use of autobiographical theorists such as Nancy K. Miller, Paul Eakin, Susanna Egan, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson<sup>3</sup> who developed an interest in the self as relational, and not merely the solitary narrator. Satrapi’s story is intrinsically related to her family, including her executed uncle Anoosh, her friend Niloufar, and the Iranian women she encounters at university.

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2. George Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”; Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*; William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*.

3. Nancy K. Miller, “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography”; John Paul Eakin, *Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of a Story*; Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Introduction: “Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices.”

The importance of Nafisi's memoir, and its literary achievement, is dependent on her students' stories.

Accordingly, as noted, I draw on the concept of "relationality" as deployed by Friedman since it has become increasingly important in the critical discourse of life writing—it dismantles the previously held view of the Western autonomous self (1998, 72). The study also highlights the central aspect of experience as constitutive of the subject's identity in terms of social and historical processes, and experience as discursive. In the light of an ongoing dichotomy between fiction or hoax and truth, I make use of Philippe Lejeune's theory of the "Autobiographical Pact" (1973, 3). The aim behind establishing a tangible connection between the author's name, the narrator, and that of the protagonist, stems from the importance of demonstrating the aim of the memoir, as a flourishing genre, to offer its readers historically accurate experiences from territories previously inaccessible.

The book draws upon Lejeune's later development of his theory. The study does affirm the veracity of ascribing the identity of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist in *RLT* and *Persepolis* (1) and (2), and sheds light on the discursive construction of the self. However, both memoirs manifest this process of construction differently. Therefore, the study also aims at demonstrating the construction of a multiplicity of selves in *Persepolis* as opposed to *RLT* within the genre of the comic. Hence, a definition of the genre will depend on such comic theorists as Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen, Charles Hatfield, and Will Eisner.<sup>4</sup> My approach to *Persepolis* will consider the comic as a distinctive language, a common approach in comic studies (Groensteen 2007, 19). A close examination of the main components of the graphic space, such as gutters, panels, boxes, page layout, border strips, comic styles, word balloons, narrative repetition, and closure, is necessary for interpreting the experiences of both the avatar Marji and the writer Satrapi. This method of approaching the graphic memoir is advocated by what Groensteen calls "pertinent contextual rapports" (*The System of Comics*), and by what Eisner (*Comics and Sequential Art*) and McCloud (*Understanding Comics*) refer to as creating a "grammar of comics" (2008, 19; 1994, 5).

The spatio-topical apparatus of the comic impinges on the reader a dynamic participation in meaning creation. In fact, this study is deeply concerned with the active role of the reader as an important component of

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4. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*; Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*; Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*; Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from The Legendary Cartoonist*.

the interpretive process in both graphic and narrative memoirs. The reader's interpretation is determined by the historical context of the writing and the distribution of both memoirs. Here, Reader Reception Theory proves to be a necessary theoretical tool through which the research draws on the role of the reader as a participant in meaning creation. The analysis is primarily directed via Hans Robert Jauss's<sup>5</sup> concept of "horizons of expectations" and Hans-Georg Gadmer's "historical situatedness" (Selden 1989, 95). The choice of both terms stems from the inclusion of the reader's experience and world-view within the act of interpretation. Therefore, time and historical determinants are of crucial importance in the interpretive process, especially the fact that the release of both memoirs occurred during a boom in Iranian women's life narratives that share a critical stance toward the treatment of women in post-revolutionary Iran. Additionally, the circulation of these memoirs takes place within a historical time frame, characterized by a Western demonization of Iran and Islam. Hence, the reader's historical knowledge is significant in filling in the gaps to question and analyze the writer's purported intentions.

If the narrative memoir demands the active participation of the reader, the graphic memoir as comic, categorizes the reader as the author's active "accomplice" in constructing the meaning of the comic text (Eisner 2008, 40). The reader of the comic is an interpreter of the visual and textual space. In both memoirs, though, the cultural and historical contexts partly determine the interpretation, which is ultimately constructed by the reader. Because the aim of the book is to excavate the voices of previously silenced Iranian women through the study of the memoir and to reveal social realities in post-revolutionary Iran, a New-Historicist approach proves to be a necessary theoretical platform.

In his comment on "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts," Louise Montrose reveals the interplay between the literary text and history (1989, 20). In other words, a New-Historicist approach to the literary text cannot examine the embodiment of the narrative and graphic dimension except within the historical contours of the era. The New-Historicist approach examines the reconstruction of the past in both memoirs as revelators of political and social realities and as fertile grounds for the circulation of various ideological discourses. The most attractive aspect of the New-Historicist practice is its commitment to what Clifford Geertz calls "thick description in which an event or an anecdote is 're-read' in such a way as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the

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5. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*.

behavioral codes, logics and motive forces controlling a whole society” (Buss 2002, 222). The reading of *RLT* and the *Persepolis* series in the light of a New-Historicist approach also allows for a construction of the positioning of the female writers and protagonists within a discourse of power as targets of a discursive and institutionalized authority.

The study also draws heavily on Michel Foucault (“Body and Power”) and Louis Althusser’s (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”) conceptions of ideology and power. Despite the latter’s departure from the Althusserian framework of ideology and the centrality of the State, Foucault, like Althusser, acknowledges that the process of becoming a subject is devoid of power (Foucault 1984, 65). Contrary to Althusser, Foucault conceives power as strictly connected to knowledge and bodies (1980, 58). In *RLT* and *Persepolis* (1) and (2), power takes the shape of both the Althusserian and Foucauldian conceptions. Iranian women are in Althusserian terms “hailed” that is, controlled by the power of the state and their bodies fixed by the power of discourse (*Marxist.org*). Therefore, the work offers a kind of complementarity between Althusser’s ideological interpellation and Foucault’s notion of power.

It is worth noting that many feminist scholars find Foucault’s approach of governing the body a point of departure. They argue that a woman’s body is caught in a process of normalization and subjectification. My research also bridges the gap between Foucauldian theory and feminist thought by elucidating the appropriation of Foucault’s analysis of the effect of power on bodies by feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, Jana Sawicki, and Linda Alcoff.<sup>6</sup>

The appropriation of Foucault by feminists expands the Foucauldian concept of “docile bodies” and transcends the notion of the body as essentially male (Foucault 1984, 50). The study, therefore, examines women’s subjectification through a close reading of the proliferation of regulatory discourse on sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran in *RLT* and *Persepolis*. Butler’s gender performative theory is also significant in establishing a connection between gender identity and the daily reiteration of imposed behaviors. Resistance and agency remain possible and both memoirs offer valuable sites for women’s transgression and subversion of disciplinary patterns.

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6. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*; Susan Bordo, “Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body”; Lee Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power”; Jana Sawicki, “Feminism Foucault and ‘Subjects’ of Power and Freedom”; Linda Martin Alcoff, “Survivor Discourse.”