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To the silent women and their unwritten autobiographies

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Diplomarbeit leistet einen Beitrag zur Literatur der postkolonialen Autobiografiestudien durch einer Analyse des verkörperten Selbst und des relationalen Selbst in Azar Nafisis Memoiren, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) und *Things I've Been Silent About* (2008) als Beispiele der Lebenswerke iranischer Frauen in der Diaspora. Diese beiden Themen der Subjektivität wurden durch Moore-Gilberts Arbeit in postkolonialen Autobiografiestudien inspiriert. Besessen von dem Übergang zwischen Verhüllung und Enthüllung des Körpers, kämpft Nafisi in *Reading Lolita* darum, dass Eigentumsrecht am weiblichen Körper zurückzugewinnen und damit in einem autoritären Staat Individualität zu erhalten. Diese Verkörperung wird in ihrem Memoiren in verschiedenen Themen umgesetzt, wie etwa im symbolischen Aufbau des Egos im Lacan'schen Sinn durch die unbehagliche Konfrontation des Selbst mit seinem Abbild; Verkörperung von Raum und Zeit; die Kolonisierung des weiblichen Körpers durch die herrschenden Gesellschaftssysteme durch den Schleier, die Überwachung und Zensur; die Entkolonisierung des Körpers durch Literatur und die Fantasie als Form des Widerstands und der Befreiung. Ich zeige jedoch, dass der Diskurs der Entkolonisierung des Körpers in den Memoiren mehrere Abweichungen aufweist. Dazu gehört das Verfolgen der Individualität als ultimatives Ziel durch Suchen von Zuflucht in der Isolierung, dem Egoismus und schließlich im Hass der Massen.

Ich befasse mich auch damit, wie Nafisis zweites Memoire, *Things* — im Gegensatz zum ersten, welches ein autonomes Selbst darstellt – eine Hommage an ihre persönliche Vergangenheit, die Vergangenheit und das Leben ihrer Eltern und die vielen Personen und Gruppen ist, welche im ersten Memoire zum Schweigen gebracht oder zensiert wurden. In *Things* stellt Nafisi die lebenslange Beziehung mit ihrer Mutter vor, die sich im Laufe der Jahre in verschiedenen Phasen entwickelt und gegen Ende relativ gesehen reift. Auch eine literarische Beziehung zu ihrem Vater wird dargestellt, indem Nafisi ihn durch Abschnitte seiner Autobiografie rekonstruiert, die sie mit ihren eigenen Kommentaren versieht. Sie zeichnet außerdem eine Beziehung zwischen dem Selbst und der Nation, indem sie Augenblicke aus der Geschichte des Irans erzählt und damit ihren persönlichen mit dem politischen Hintergrund kombiniert, in dem sie ihre Familiengeschichte ansiedelt. Nafisi nutzt das Schreiben über diese Beziehungen als Plattform für die Diskussion verschiedener sozialer und kultureller Probleme. Im Vergleich zu *Reading Lolita* ist ihr autobiografisches Selbst in *Things* nicht nur relationaler, sondern es identifiziert sich auch eher mit der Kultur ihres Heimatlands als mit der des Westens.

Abstract

This thesis contributes to the literature of postcolonial Autobiography Studies by presenting an analysis of the embodied self and the relational self in Azar Nafisi's memoirs, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), and *Things I've Been Silent About* (2008) as examples of life-writings of Iranian women in Diaspora. These two thematics of subjectivity were inspired by Moore-Gilbert's work in postcolonial Autobiography Studies. Being obsessed with the transition between covering and uncovering the body, Nafisi in *Reading Lolita* fights over regaining ownership rights to the female body and thereby seeking individuality under an authoritative state. This embodiment is realized through various topics in the memoir, such as the symbolic construction of ego in the Lacanian sense through the uneasy confrontation of the self and its image; the embodiment of place and space; the colonization of the female body by the ruling systems of society through the veil, surveillance and censorship; and the decolonization of the body through literature and imagination as forms of resistance and liberation. However, I demonstrate that the discourse of decolonization of the body in the memoir has several inconsistencies, including pursuing individuality as the ultimate goal by seeking refuge in isolation, egotism and eventually hatred of the masses.

I also discuss how Nafisi's second memoir, *Things*—unlike the first memoir which displays an autonomous selfhood—is an homage to her personal past, to her parents' histories and lives, and to many individuals and collectives who were silenced or censored in the first memoir. In *Things* Nafisi depicts a life-long relationship with her mother that develops in various phases over the years, relatively maturing at the end. Also a literary relationship with her father is presented in the memoir as Nafisi reconstructs him through sections of his autobiography, accompanied by her own commentaries. The memoirist also depicts a relationship between the self and nation by recounting moments in Iran's history to combine the personal with the political background in which the memoirist places the family history. Writing about all these relationships provides a stage for Nafisi to discuss several social and cultural issues. Compared to *Reading Lolita*, the autobiographical self in *Things* is not only more relational, but it embraces the culture of the homeland rather than the West.

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Introduction

The recent increase in the genre autobiography as a form of individual presentation of the self by the members of Iranian Diaspora in the highlighted dichotomies of East/West and Islam/Christianity following the discourse of 9/11 casts light on the necessity to bridge the cultural gap among ethnicities, nations, and civilizations. The flourishing of the genre, especially among Iranian women in Diaspora, during the decades after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, and specifically after 9/11, raises questions and sheds light on many critical and political issues that are raised in presenting the self to others. The once silent—or silenced—Iranian woman, now distanced from her homeland, is eloquently articulate in front of the Western gaze, and is eager to share her life narrative despite numerous difficulties such as language barriers and the cultural differences that she experiences with her readership.

If previously the “contact zone” of the colonizer and the colonized subject was located mostly in the colonized territory toward which the Westerners travelled, today the Diaspora is the actual place of this confrontation and it is the once-colonized subject who has emigrated to live in the West. The postcolonial autobiographer is now writing on behalf of herself. But how does she present the self in her memoir? And for whom does she write? When did she start to write about herself? What is the history of the genre in the homeland (in this case Iran)? What constraints does living in Diaspora impose on the diasporic women autobiographers and what liberations could they benefit from? What theoretical frameworks can be used to analyze the presentations of the self in these autobiographical works? And what are the results of employing such critical tools on life-writings of Iranian women in Diaspora?

This dissertation aims to respond to the above questions in three main chapters. The first chapter is a historical and theoretical review of the field of postcolonial Autobiography Studies. Each of the next two chapters will then focus on one aspect of an autobiography of Azar Nafisi. With her two memoirs, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), and *Things I've Been Silent About* (2008), Nafisi is one of the pioneers of publishing in this genre among Iranian women in Diaspora.

In the first chapter of this dissertation I will present a historical overview of Autobiography Studies from the postcolonial perspective. This chapter demonstrates how the field has developed during its history, what its main concerns and critical points are, and how this approach has learned from other critical approaches, such as feminism, in analyzing works of autobiography. Questions such as “who is eligible to write in this genre?” and “can the subaltern write autobiography?” and “whose autobiography is worth reading and studying?” are among the most debated ones throughout the history of postcolonial Autobiography Studies.

Feminist study of autobiography discovers themes and uses approaches in order to distinguish women’s life-writings from men’s and to demonstrate how women’s autobiographies were marginalized throughout history. By focusing on thematics of subjectivity in life-writings, I will introduce the categorization of Bart Moore-Gilbert, who suggests the feminist study of these thematics of subjectivity can be beneficial for postcolonial Autobiography Studies. He classifies thematics of subjectivity in three sub-categories. They include, firstly, the presentation of subjectivity as a “rejection of the model of sovereign, centred, unified Selfhood allegedly constructed in western male autobiography” (xviii). Secondly, feminist critics argue that canonical autobiographers have presented an autonomous self in their writings, whereas women portray themselves in relation to others. Thirdly, there is the issue of the body and the way women, in contrast to men, spotlighted it in their autobiographies (xviii).

As Moore-Gilbert (xx) remarks, these three thematics of subjectivity—i.e., the fragmented self, the relational self, and the embodied self—that critics have observed in women’s life-writings, can also be found in autobiographies of the postcolonial subject, be it male or female. In the course of this dissertation I will discuss and explore two of these thematics of subjectivity in Nafisi’s memoirs.

In Chapter 2 the issues of body and embodiment in presenting the autobiographical self in the first memoir will be discussed. Whether writing about corporeality is a recent phenomenon in the history of autobiography or an old issue, whether the narrating body is valorized and in what sense it could be interpreted, and what socio/political meanings the autobiographers can imply in writing or being silent about the body—these are the theoretical concerns in this chapter.

By analyzing issues of embodiment in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (henceforth, *Reading Lolita*), I will show how for the memoirist these concerns turn into a site to search for individuality. I will analyze how the embodiment of the subject is realized in *Reading Lolita* by discussing the following topics: the uneasy confrontation of self and its image and the extremely symbolic construction of ego in the Lacanian sense; the craving of color—an aspect of embodiment and physicality—as a call for individuality; the embodiment of place and space and the vain effort to separate the private space from the public one as they constantly violate and transgress each other.

More than anything else, *Reading Lolita* is a book about de/colonization of the body. Nafisi describes how the colonized individual female body—alive or dead—does not belong to the person anymore, but to the ruling systems of the society. I will discuss how the memoirist shows the colonization of the female body through the veil imposed upon it and the blindfolded surveillance of the censors who restrict embodiments of all kinds, and how she depicts the unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized body. By analyzing literature and imagination as forms of resistance that the memoirist endeavors to practice, I demonstrate the decolonization of the body throughout *Reading Lolita*. Literature, to a great extent, is liberating for women in *Reading Lolita*. It is through reading, recounting, and interpreting stories that women become empowered to fight for their rights to their own bodies and to seek individuality for themselves.

However, the discourse that *Reading Lolita* constructs for decolonizing the body, I will argue, has its own deficiencies and problems. For instance, reclaiming the individuality of female characters is hardly successful, as most of Nafisi's female characters remain abstract and almost identical. Pursuing individuality goes to extremes in the form of seeking refuge in isolation, aloofness, egotism, and hatred of the masses. Gradually, the gap between the individual and the collective is widened as dichotomies such as Us/Them are emphasized in the memoir. Finally, Nafisi betrays an inconsistency between what it means for her to have appropriate versus inappropriate control over one's body.

In Chapter 3 I will analyze another thematic of subjectivity, namely the relational self, in Nafisi's second memoir, *Things I've Been Silent About* (hereafter, "*Things*"). As opposed to the autonomous self, which was favored by scholars of canonical male

autobiographies, the relational self has been suggested by some feminist critics to characterize the autobiographical selves in women's life-writings. However, the universality of this idea was later questioned by feminists who argued that the reductionist perspective was ignoring the variety of selfhood with which class, race, geography, and education inform women's subjectivities.

While Nafisi in *Reading Lolita* constructs an autobiographical self of a woman who seeks individuality in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, I will discuss how in *Things* she portrays a relational autobiographical self rather than a monadic one. In other words, *Things* is a response to the censored relational self of the autobiographer in the past, in which she depicts her various relationships with others, especially with her parents. Nafisi depicts a lifelong relationship with her mother, one that changes over the years, and develops in various ways, relatively maturing at the end. She reconstructs her father partly through his own written words, and partly through the commentary, annotation, and interpretation of his autobiographical text.

Moreover, I will discuss how in *Things*, the autobiographical self is not only related to her immediate others, but to non-immediate others, specifically with the nation and its history. However, politics in *Things* does not override the personal but it provides the personal with an intertwined background in which the memoirist places the history of the family. Mother, Father, and the nation aside, the autobiographical subject in *Things* builds relationships with other individuals such as her significant others, offspring, relatives, family friends, and acquaintances. Writing about all these relationships provides a stage for the memoirist to discuss gender issues in the private lives of Iranians. The question of staying and resisting the authoritative regime in the homeland or emigrating to live in the freedom of Western countries is the topic of dispute here.

Chapter 1. Postcolonial Autobiographies: a Brief Theoretical History

This chapter offers a historical overview of Autobiography Studies from the postcolonial perspective. After defining the terminology used in this thesis and discussing some definitional common grounds, I will exhibit how postcolonial concerns were ignored to a large extent in Autobiography Studies and I will show how this field of study can benefit from scholarly feminist contribution to this field—as Moore-Gilbert suggests. The final pages of this chapter offer a review of the life-writings of Iranian women inside and outside the country, and it attempts to discover the reasons of the changing attitudes of women autobiographers in the Diaspora towards presenting the autobiographical self to a non-indigenous readership.

Autobiography as a term denotes the self-writing about one's life. In their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss the history of the term autobiography and other similar words that cover the idea and practice of “self life writing.” They point out that the term autobiography in Greek signifies the words “autos”, “bios”, and “graphe” that mean “self”, “life”, and “writing” respectively (1). Although the practice of “self life writing” ages back centuries, the coinage of the term autobiography is recorded to be in the eighteenth century. The term “memoir” was also used alongside the word autobiography until the twentieth century, as Robert Folkenflik states (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 2).

Smith and Watson state that the generally understood notion of the term autobiography emerged in the Enlightenment as a genre of life-narrative to present the self, and it became canonical in Western culture. This notion “celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story.” (*Reading Autobiography* 3) Many scholars in Autobiography Studies have attempted to specify the generic boundaries of “self life writing” and to list numerous definitions. One of the frequently referred definitions was introduced by Philippe Lejeune, who defines autobiography as “[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (298).

There have been many challenges to define the genre throughout the history of Autobiography Studies. Generic definitions tend to include some and exclude others. Consequently, defining a term, a genre, or a field of study, raises questions about categorizations and divisions. Postmodern and postcolonial critics interrogated the once-rigid boundaries of the genre because these generic definitions often mitigate or ignore values of other types of life-writings produced outside the canonical autobiographies. Some of these debates will be brought up in the course of this dissertation. But for clarifying the usage of the term “autobiography” and its synonyms, the prevalent understanding of the term “autobiography” in this dissertation will be its concise definition in *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “The writing of one’s own history; the story of one’s life written by himself.” Additionally, there are other terms used as synonyms for this word, such as “life-writing”, and “memoir”. The notion of life-writing in this dissertation originates from Bart Moore-Gilbert’s usage of the term in his book *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation*. Therefore, the term life-writing is to “describe work which is autobiographical without necessarily observing the classical rules of the genre, as is often the case in the Self-narration of western women and postcolonial subjects” (131).

1.1. Three Phases of Autobiography Studies

The field of Autobiography Studies has evolved over years of scholarly studying of life-writings and analyzing their various dimensions within numerous critical frameworks. The process of the development and expansion of Autobiography Studies can be divided into three historical phases as Bart Moore-Gilbert explains in his book *Postcolonial Life-Writing* (xi): From the late 19th century to the Second World War, from the Second World War to approximately 1980, and from 1980 onwards. This categorization is based on paradigm shifts of critics in Autobiography Studies in various features of life-writings as well as the change of theoretical frameworks and focal points of attention in which scholars analyzed the texts. The first phase of Autobiography Studies, starting from the late nineteenth century and lasting until World War II, began with Georg Misch, who was one of the first scholars to characterize and theorize the genre. This German critic elaborates on a history of autobiography from ancient times to the present in an anthology entitled *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*. Misch’s book was published first in 1907 in German and was translated into English forty years later in 1948 (Moore-Gilbert xi-xii).

In the introduction of his work, Misch explains the necessity to study autobiographies of “learned men”, such as Herder, Goethe, Rousseau, and Dante. In Misch’s standpoint, these works offer the reader “some service, either by way of instruction or of warning” (1). Moreover, he believes that the genre autobiography is a product of Western culture. The reason, as he argues, is related to the significance of individuality in Western culture from the Renaissance onwards, because autobiography as a form of writing about self needs a cultural context in which individuality is considerably valued and respected (Misch 1). He argues that with Christianity, autobiography finds a deeper dimension, namely, “the Christian practice of self-examination” and the best example of this can be found in St. Augustine’s autobiographical work, *Confessions* (17). Augustine’s account is spiritual and subjective, as Misch describes, and the subjectivity of the work makes it a modern genre in the Augustinian sense¹.

Autobiography, in Misch’s view, belongs only to the modern European world, where people have a “complicated mental life.” He further develops his argument by postulating that the production of autobiography in the Western world is a sign of modernity, even though he wonders why the genre did not flourish in classical Greece, “the matrix of humanism in the Western world” (Misch 17). This contradiction suggests that Misch’s views reflect a Eurocentric perspective, revealing a racial elitism, as Misch himself concludes the introduction of his book with a comment on societies that in his view lack autobiographies: “It is true that a history of autobiography, since it has to deal with the more complicated phenomena of mental life, cannot reach back to primitive peoples” (Misch 18). In other words, every modern and advanced civilization in Misch’s perspective is expected to produce great autobiographies and if a civilization lacks autobiographies one should be suspicious of the degree of its advancement or be amazed at this seeming contradiction.

The second phase of Autobiography Studies that starts after the end of the Second World War is still under the influence of Misch’s Eurocentric ideas on autobiography. In 1956, French critic Georges Gusdorf, in an article titled “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, further develops Misch’s ideas. Gusdorf is the eminent scholarly figure of the second phase of Autobiography Studies. Elaborating on the Eurocentric

¹ Augustine describes the leading European historians as “the first modern men” (Misch 17).

² *Baburnama* or Babur’s diary is the autobiography of Zahir al-Dil Muhammad Babur,

perspective of Misch, Gusdorf argues that autobiography is not a genre that can exist everywhere and it is only to be found in Western culture:

It would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. (Gusdorf 78)

Gusdorf believes that life-writing belongs to Western men and if non-Westerns have accomplished autobiographical writing the credit goes to Westerns who colonized them and through this process brought them civilization, intellect, and therefore the ability to write of their selves. A non-Western mind in Gusdorf's view is not able to take the self seriously into account and it needs a Western intellect and perception in order to think of and write about the self. Giving an example of such men, Gusdorf mentions Gandhi's autobiography, in which Gandhi uses "Western means to defend the East" (Gusdorf 78). Furthermore, in Gusdorf's belief, autobiography is a genre that is written where there is self-consciousness and in primitive societies the lack of self-consciousness does not allow the writing of autobiography to occur (Gusdorf 78-79).

Additionally, he further expands the list of canonical autobiographical works that Misch had started to mention, and completes it with figures like Newman, Renan, Mill, Chateaubriand, Gide, and Montaigne as further examples of European men of intellect whose autobiographies are worth studying.

As Trev Lynn Broughton mentions, Gusdorf's rhetoric of autobiography "expropriates [it] from the clutches of the 'positivist' historian" (7) and presents it as a work of art, in which fact and fiction can be mingled. This is a big contribution to the theories of Autobiography Studies because the question whether life-writings represent reality or construct fiction has been proposed by scholars of the field as well as readers of autobiographies since the birth of the genre.

Borrowing the concept of Lacanian mirror, Gusdorf likens autobiography to the mirror that reflects the individual's image of self. Gusdorf believes this self-reflection would frighten the primitive, unlike the Western, who is at ease with himself in any appearance or guise. What is more, by adding a metaphysical characteristic to the

existence of mankind, the self-consciousness is bolstered through Christianity: “Christian destiny unfolds as a dialogue of the soul with God in which, right up to the end, every action, every initiative of thought or of conduct, can call everything back into question” (Gusdorf 81). What Gusdorf does not take into account is that this dialogue of the soul with God has belonged not only to Christianity but also to all the monotheistic religions as well as many other systems of beliefs.

Roy Pascal, another scholar of the second phase of Autobiography Studies, is also in line with Misch and Gusdorf when arguing in his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) that autobiography is a Western art and is inherently European. Pascal wonders about the non-significance of autobiography outside Europe and in a “circular argument”, as Moore-Gilbert describes it (xii), Pascal writes that for instance, if the sixteenth century Bâbur’s memoir² had belonged to Europe it would have emerged as a significant work in the history of autobiography. This argument shows that Pascal hesitates for a second with the intention of not generalizing his ideas to the whole world of writing and publishing outside the Western territories; however, he concludes ultimately that “there remains no doubt that autobiography is essentially European” (Pascal in Moore-Gilbert xii).

From 1980 onwards the third phase of Autobiography Studies begins, which has Philippe Lejeune’s, Paul de Man’s, William Spengemann’s, and Olney’s works as its models of studying the genre (Moore-Gilbert xii-xiii). Lejeune in his article “The Autobiographical Pact” points out the generic problems that exist in discussions on autobiography due to a lack of terminology and specific vocabulary among scholars of the field. In his article, he proposes a solution to the problem in an attempt to define the boundaries of the genre. Lejeune indicates that his definition covers historically only a few decades more than two hundred years of writing autobiographies in European literature and culture. However, unlike Misch and Gusdorf and other scholars of the first and second phases, Lejeune does not believe that the genre belongs only to Europeans. He writes, “this definition [...] deals only with European literature; this does not mean that the existence of a personal literature before 1770 or outside Europe must be denied”

² *Baburnama* or Babur’s diary is the autobiography of Zahir al-Dil Muhammad Babur, Timurid prince of the 16th century and the founder of Mughul Empire in India. He was cultivated in Persian culture and expanded this culture to central Asia. See the entry “BĀBOR, ZAHĪR-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

(Lejeune 297). Therefore, in the third phase of Autobiography Studies one can observe the gradual fall of Eurocentric frameworks and the rise of a postcolonial approach. Considering Lejeune, for instance, although he may have not studied autobiographies written and published in non-Western countries, at least he does not deny the existence of the genre outside Europe.

In his article “Autobiography as De-facement”, Paul de Man questions the very assumptions that scholars of autobiographies assume to be true for life-writings. One such assumption is, for instance, considering autobiography as a literary genre –an argument that Gusdorf was also in favor of. But, unlike Gusdorf, De Man believes that this assumption endorses the distance of the autobiographer from his/her lived experience; consequently, history and aesthetics may diverge. Moreover, from the perspective of generic historians, autobiography (if given a genre) has to be confined to the boundaries of specific time. Thus, one always becomes obliged to answer questions such as, “[c]an there be autobiography before the 18th century or is it a specifically pre-romantic and romantic phenomenon?” De Man thinks that a generic historian would answer positively (De Man 919). Furthermore, defining autobiography as a literary genre or as a genre in general, raises other challenges as De Man argues: “each specific instance [of an autobiography] seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres” (920). He then suggests categorizing autobiography not as a genre but as a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts,” because the distinction between autobiography and fiction is not a rigid one (921).

James Olney is another major scholar of Autobiography Studies of the third phase. In the preface to his book *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Olney, like De Man, points out the problematic generic categorization of autobiography and the impossibility of drawing a clear-cut line between novel and autobiography (Olney 4). Then, in a short review of the history of Autobiography Studies beginning with Misch and Gusdorf, Olney presents a brief literature review of the field including the list of autobiographers who have been under the focus of study. Subsequently, he remarks on how autobiography opened windows to then non-mainstream studies, such as “Black Studies” and “Women’s Studies” and became their “focalizing literature” (13). Reciprocally, minority groups have benefited from the genre, as in the case of black experience, which used autobiography to enter “the house of literature.” Examples are

writers like Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X and Maya Angelou, as Olney lists (15). Women's Studies has also drawn attention to works of autobiographies written by women. However, there is a lack of theoretical work as well as critical analysis of the field to some extent, as Olney writes (16). What is worth observing is the difference of the presentation of self between men's and women's autobiographies (Olney 17).

Additionally, the third phase of Autobiography Studies, as Moore-Gilbert writes, witnesses a growth in regional studies on life-writing in areas like the Caribbean, Australia and North Africa. These studies shed light on the significance of exploring and analyzing the genre in postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, they are not without flaws. One such is the emphasis on fictional autobiography versus non-fictional life-writings. Another is that individual critics are habitually confined to either men's or women's life-writings and rarely compare them to each other. Moreover, these studies do not show a wide range of interest in terms of history and geography. Instead, they tend to focus on one or two areas of geography and in a specific period of time (e.g. from 1960 onwards) (Moore-Gilbert xiv).

1.2. Feminist and Postcolonial Approaches to Autobiography Studies

Women's Studies with its feminist approaches has devoted a great amount of attention to the genre in the third phase of Autobiography Studies. Moore-Gilbert reports how the groundbreaking collection of essays edited by Estelle Jelinek in 1980 scrutinizes women's autobiographies in order to find common characteristics and related ideas that resulted in their works becoming unnoticed by critics, compared to men's life-writing. In other words, Jelinek questions why critics show more interest in men's life-writings and ignore women's autobiographies. Jelinek's book succeeded in gaining a higher status for women's autobiographies in comparison with what they had in the first and second phases of Autobiography Studies (Moore-Gilbert xv).

In the introduction to her collection of essays on autobiography, Jelinek objects to the critics' ignorance towards women's autobiographies. In theorizing the poetics of the genre, she argues that gender has been a crucial factor in the sense that, on the whole, men's lives compared to women's lives have been entitled as significant and worthy of

studying. Meanwhile, women's works always received stereotypical tags and labels. The same experiences written by a man "would be described in heroic or exceptional terms: alienation, initiation, manhood, apotheosis, transformation, guilt, identity crises, and symbolic journeys," however, if they are written by a woman they "are viewed in more conventional terms: heartbreak, anger, loneliness, motherhood, humility, confusion and self-abnegation" (Jelinek 5).

Leaving the subjective perspective of critics in Autobiography Studies aside, Jelinek's observation demonstrates that the male-centered poetics of the genre is not appropriate for studies of women's lives. For instance, Jelinek discusses that James Cox's argument, that in the United States the history of autobiography has developed alongside American history and has witnessed the production of more examples of the genre in relation to crucial events of that history, does not hold for women. Women's life-writings have shown quite different interests and the history of their life-writings is not necessarily reflecting the time and history in which they live. For example, men have shown more interest in writing their life during the Gold Rush and the Revolution, while the corresponding dates in women's history of life-writing display a decrease during these times. In the Civil War period, military men were more productive in publishing their memoirs and it is only in the late nineteenth century that women's autobiographies increased considerably in number and continued to grow through the improvement of women's educational and literacy status. Between 1890 and the First World War, as well as in the late 1960s and 1970s, women's autobiographies reached their climax (Jelinek 5-6).

Also, women's autobiographies differ from men's in terms of content and form. Some scholars believe that these differences necessitate a change in the poetics of the genre or that women's autobiographies "constitute, if not a subgenre, then an autobiographical tradition different from the male tradition" (Jelinek 6). One of these characteristics with which critics labeled autobiographies originates from a male perspective to history. Good autobiographers were expected to reflect upon their history and be commentators of their time and society. Jelinek writes, "[t]his criterion is adequately supported by the many male autobiographies which concentrate on chronicling the progress of their authors' professional or intellectual lives, usually in the affairs of the world, and their life studies are for the most part success stories" (Jelinek 7).

Jelinek (7-8) continues that unlike men, women have hardly showed interest in chronicling an external history in their life-writings. What they stress, as Jelinek suggests, is usually an internal history: a domestic sphere instead of the public world. “[D]omestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced them” (8) are what women highlight in their autobiographies. This has also been the case for women who have not confined themselves to domestic life and have pursued their own career; nevertheless, their autobiographies are not very different from others in the sense that they too emphasize the personal and domestic aspects of their lives more than other aspects. In the following, Jelinek explores some examples of women’s life-writings and their focus on personal and domestic aspects instead of the outer world:

Neither Edith Wharton’s *A Backward Glance* (1934) nor Ellen Glasgow’s *The Woman Within* (1954) tells us about the writing of their successful novels or of the recognition that resulted from them. *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935) focuses on Gilman’s struggles to overcome the severe emotional handicaps that plagued her work life in the reform movement. Hellman concentrates on portraits of friends in her three autobiographical works, and in the one chapter on the theater in *Pentimento* (1973), she tells us amusing stories about eccentric producers, directors, and actors but nothing about her writing. Carrighar is a frequently published naturalist, but she devotes her autobiography almost entirely to her depressing emotional life up to her mid-thirties, *before* her professional work began. (She wrote *Home to the Wilderness* [1973] in her late sixties.) What Mead relates about her early field trips in *Blackberry Winter* (1972) is for the purpose of explaining the development of her interest in the maturation of children; she, like Adams, skips twenty years of her life, but they are her most active professional years –the time between the birth of her daughter and granddaughter—because her autobiographical intention is to outline the proper training of children. (Jelinek 9-10)

Jelinek discusses more issues related to gender in the introduction to her collection of essays. One such is, for instance, the difference between men and women in portraying their childhood in memoirs. She believes that men try to create a heroic image of themselves in the eyes of the reader, when talking about their childhood. Men “may exaggerate, mythologize, or monumentalize their boyhood and their entire lives” (14) whereas women do not project merely a confident self-image but rather reveal their self-consciousness (14-15).

Another gender-specific characteristic of life-writings concerns the way men and women construct their life events in their writings. Jelinek finds men presenting a

coherent picture of their lives usually through a linear, chronological account. Men focus “on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality” (17). Order and harmony come together in men’s lives, while for women this is not usually the case. In Jelinek’s view, women’s narratives, on the contrary, tend to be fragmented, disconnected and diverse. As women’s roles in society appear to be more multidimensional, the way they portray themselves is also influenced by this characteristic. This has led to a marginalization of women’s life-writings by critics of Autobiography Studies, as Jelinek states: “[women’s] life studies are excluded from the genre and cast into the ‘non-artistic’ categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other disjunctive forms” (Jelinek 17).

Moore-Gilbert (xv) notes that Jelinek’s collection of essays succeeded in drawing the attention of the critics of autobiography to women’s life-writings, thus making the third phase of studying the genre more aware of gender-related issues in writing autobiographies. This awareness can be adapted by postcolonial critics who seek to discuss issues and concepts of race, colonialism, and otherness in the critical writings on autobiographies written by non-Western subjects, as Debra Kelly suggests. Kelly writes, “[o]f particular relevance is the analysis of the alternative and diverse practices of women writers that call into question the assumptions made by Western male autobiography and by histories of development of the genre written by male critics” (Kelly qtd. in Moore-Gilbert xv). Kelly also believes that women and the colonized subject share certain commonalities and both need to decolonize themselves. Nonetheless, as Moore-Gilbert points out, “feminist inflections of Auto/biography Studies have often proved no more open to postcolonial life-writing than the male critical tradition” (Moore Gilbert xv).

Although Jelinek’s collection of essays includes, for instance, a variety of gender-related topics, it fails—with the exception of one article—to raise postcolonial awareness in its contents (Moore-Gilbert xv). The topics that Jelinek covers range from a wide variety of subjects such as “The Emergence of Women’s Autobiography in England”, “Spiritual Autobiographies of Eighteenth Century Quaker and Puritan Women in America”, “The Making of a Female Philosopher”, “Selves in Hiding”, “Towards a Theory of Form in Feminist Autobiography”, and “The Autobiographer and Her Readers: From Apology to Affirmation”. Additionally, the collection has addressed

non-white female writings in an article by Regina Blackburn with the title of “In Search of the Black Female Self: African-American Women’s Autobiographies and Ethnicity”.

Jelinek’s work was subsequently followed by other feminist critics of Autobiography Studies in their own collections of essays. These critics aimed at continuing what Jelinek had started, namely, expanding the critical theory of women’s autobiography writing: *Autobiography* (1982) by Janet Gunn, *The Female Autograph* (1984) by Domna Stanton, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* (1987) by Sidonie Smith, *Life-Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* (1988) by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, and finally *The Private Self* (1988) by Shary Benstock, like Jelinek’s collection, were dealing with gender issues in life-writings. Nonetheless, only two of these books, namely *The Female Autograph* and *Life-Lines*, incorporate postcolonial autobiographers and/or critiques of the field into their work (Moore-Gilbert xv).

In the introduction to *Life-Lines*, Brodzki and Schenck explain how during history autobiography as a genre was used like a mirror in front of the male subjects to reflect identity and representation of the self and how this mirror was less tolerated when it was in the hands of female subjects. This mirror was supposed not only to reflect the male autobiographer’s personal life but also his time and era in its wholeness and unity. The female subject, conversely, was denied being given a voice and being taken seriously in the male tradition of Autobiography Studies, which sought exemplary lives of men, such as Saint Augustine, Henry Adams, and Jean-Jacque Rousseau: men who thought of themselves as being different from others, claiming to be the center of a national experience, or celebrating themselves as someone who is above ordinary humans and close to divinity (Brodzki and Schenck 1-4).

Brodzki and Schenck (5-6) argue that modernity allowed this mirror—autobiography—to reflect the distorted, undulated image of the modern subject, male or female. Although female writers had been using this image of the modern subject for years, it was only with a male author’s memoir, namely, Roland Barthes’ autobiographical text, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, that this distortion was acknowledged and accredited among critics.³ Barthes’ fragmented representation of himself was not in line with other coherent, linear, and unified representations that men of canonical life-writings always attempted to preserve and portray (Brodzki and Schenck 5-6).

³ See Jay 1984, quoted in Brodzki and Schenck (5).

Barthes, whose works were categorized under structuralism, further in his life showed a tendency towards post-structuralism. Linda Anderson, in her study of Barthes' autobiography, writes about the deconstructions that Barthes achieves in presenting himself in his words. One such example is "discarding the first-person singular and substituting instead multiple-subject positioning: 'he', 'R.B.', 'you' and 'I' exchange places almost arbitrarily in an attempt to reinforce the effect of distance between the writer and the written text" (Anderson 66).

Another theme that will also be explored later in this dissertation is the issue of body and embodiment in life-writings of women and in postcolonial autobiographies. This issue is very present and visible in Barthes's memoir. Anderson scrutinizes the body and its different meanings and notions throughout Barthes' autobiography:

[Body] is a word which returns throughout the text and which Barthes frees from notions of the known, discrete, singularized body: 'Which body? We have several' (p.60). The body precisely resists its own conceptualization (p.80). Missing from stereotypes (p.90), it is the body which creates difference, which inflects discourse by tracing within its own movement of pleasure and desire [...] The body creates a 'passion of meaning' (p.161), a disturbance or space where something happens to language, where the body's presence both animates and displaces meaning, makes meaning both mobile and irrecoverably somewhere else. (Anderson 69)

Later, I will discuss the issue of the body in greater detail. This was just to illustrate an example of a thematic of subjectivity that feminists and postcolonial critics found specifically common in life-writings of women and postcolonial autobiographers. The deconstruction of the self, as well as many other characteristics of a modern and/or postmodern subject can be found in women's autobiographies as well. Yet, as Brodzki and Schenck (5-6) mention, the critical dialogue between feminism and deconstructionism on generic studies of autobiography was deferred because women were largely ignored by deconstructionist critics.

Subsequently, Brodzki and Schenck (7) discuss the portrayal of the female subject and demonstrate how historically women have been framed by themselves and others. One of the earliest frames used by women to have an image of themselves is the/a mirror. However, looking at one's self-portrait, a reflection that constructs a visual aspect of the self is not innocuous. The very image of the woman and the mirror, for instance, as

Brodzki and Shenck write, has connotations of imprisoning femininity because for “a woman to be reassured of her ‘look’ is to know she will be looked at” (7). The woman uses the mirror to be certain of herself in the perspective of the other. Whether according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar women were bound to have an unchanging image in the masculine literary world or be framed by “the male gaze” as some feminist film scholars have pointed out, what Brodzki and Schenck propose in their book is an active understanding of framing the female subject and readjusting the mirror in order to answer the following question: “[H]ow have women articulated their own experience, shaped their own texts artistically, met their own reflections in the problematic mirror of autobiography?” (Brodzki and Schenck 7)

Life/Lines contains four major chapters entailing themes such as female autobiographical subjects, colonized subjects and subversive discourse, maternal legacies/mythographies, and de-limiting autobiographical acts. The second section, which is devoted to postcolonial issues, aims at diversifying and taking the autobiography mirror to the non-white Western females as well. Hence, testimonials of Latin Americans, life accounts of African-Americans, an autobiography of a feminist from Egypt, and narratives of Native Americans through the eyes of a white female ethnographer are presented and discussed.

In the introduction to a groundbreaking work on postcolonial autobiography, namely, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992) Smith and Watson discuss the colonial subject, the autobiographical subject, and diverse autobiographical practices that have been presented throughout the collection's essays. This book, as Moore-Gilbert (xv) rightly states, is recognized as the acknowledged postcolonial study in autobiographies by the western feminist critics of life-writing.

In discussing the colonial subject Smith and Watson (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xiii) refer to terms like decolonization, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Decolonization had once only political connotations related to the independence movements of colonized nations, which were ruled by European colonizers. Despite the fact that colonialism is not practiced as it used to be in previous centuries, the relationship between the strong and weak nations can still have the status of colonialism or more specifically, neo-colonialism.

The very concept of colonization can indeed be found in matters related to subjectivity and its representation in Western humanism. In a Foucauldian framework for instance, “all ‘I’s are sites where generalized operations of power press ineluctably on the subject,” and in a Lacanian point of view, “everyone is subjected to and ‘colonized’ by the Law of the Father” (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xiv). Furthermore, in a materialist postmodernity, “all ‘I’s, subject to the cultural field of multiple determinations, are colon-I-zed through irresistible interpellations” (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xiv). Hence, theoretically every subject is a colonized subject if the concept of colonization is invoked comprehensively. This standpoint is, however, problematic for Smith and Watson for numerous reasons. One such reason is that there would be no escape from colonialism as everyone is “subjected” and decolonization would stay as a “utopian dream”, hence all subjects are “stripped of agency” (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xiv).

Furthermore, this apparently complex understanding of the subjectivity as Smith and Watson (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xiv) state “is a central instance of the universalizing agenda of Western theorizing that erases the subject’s heterogeneity as well as its agency.” This has been the case for feminist critics before the third wave of feminism, when a universalized female subject was assumed to exist and the aim was for her to be freed from the bonds of a universal patriarchy. What feminists such as Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, and Elizabeth V. Spellman emphasized is that “privileging the oppression of gender over and above other oppressions effectively erases the complex and often contradictory positionings of the subject” (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xiv).

Factors such as race, class, education, ethnicity and, of course, geographical location take the subjects out of the universal umbrella of fighting only against patriarchy and give them specificity along with a need to be individually positioned. Hence, patriarchy becomes also multiple and various. Likewise, if feminism has multiple forms of patriarchy to resist, colonialism can also be seen in various shapes and places for postcolonial critics. As Smith and Watson clarify, “[a]s there are various positions of specific men (for instance, those enjoying the benefits of hegemonic power, those suffering under the domination of others) to colonial environments, there are differences in the relationships of specific women to those men” (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xv).

Consequently, by highlighting factors of difference that change the status of the autobiographical subject from a universal collective to an individual affected by its social class, gender, and ethnicity, essays in *De/Colonizing the Subject* address in various ways the autobiographical practices and forms that the colonized subject uses and applies in order to challenge “voice, history, and future” (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xvii).

Smith and Watson (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xvii) then explore the concept of autobiography with regards to the autobiographical subject. In their perspective the concept of autobiography needs three “perspectival adjustments.” The first one requires treating Western life-writing practices as historical. Despite the fact that life-writing has been practiced in genres that date back to Antiquity, the very term of “autobiography” was coined only after Enlightenment. Nonetheless, the term and the practice of autobiography appeal to “a particular genealogy, resonant ideology, and discursive imperatives” (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xvii); all are grounded on a precise notion of “selfhood” that has been elaborated and emphasized in the Enlightenment. This traditional notion of selfhood has roots in the Enlightenment individualism, where autobiography places the individual in a net of advantaged features. Therefore, as Smith and Watson elaborate:

Despite their myriad differences, of place, time, histories, economics, cultural identifications, all [autobiographical] “I”s are rational, agentive, unitary. Thus the “I” becomes “Man,” putatively a marker of the universal human subject whose essence remains outside the vagaries of history, effectually what Spivak has termed the ‘straight white Christian man of property,’ whose identity is deeply embedded in a specific history of privilege. (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xvii)

Western autobiography, as Smith and Watson maintain, is based on a common idea that identifies an individual with another one and all of these autobiographical “I”s are theoretically “interesting autobiographers.” However, not all the “I”s are similar. In Western perspective if an “I” refers to a Western Man, he surely has a distinctive individual feature of his own, whereas, if an “I” is a colonized one, critics see that “I” “as an amorphous, generalized collectivity.” In this regard, “the colonized ‘other’ disappears into an anonymous, opaque collectivity of undifferentiated bodies” (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xvii). Furthermore, Western autobiography creates the laws

of the genre and by conducting this it excludes non-Western subjects from contributing to its practices (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xviii).

The second adjustment that Smith and Watson think one should be aware of when discussing the notion of autobiography is the awareness of the flexible boundaries of the genre. As Ralph Cohen (210) reminds us, scholars have to take into account that generic classifications “are empirical, not logical” and they are created by scholars and their audience in order to serve aesthetic as well as, Smith and Watson add, political purposes (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xviii).

Finally, the third adjustment invites us to seriously consider other forms of life-writing that were produced outside of Western territories, which may have taken other forms and modes of writing. Smith and Watson see this third adjustment as a long-term objective since it takes time to be accomplished. They add, “[there are] other genealogies of life story telling to be chronicled, other explorations of traditions, current and past, to be factored into the making and unmaking of autobiographical subjects in a global environment” (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject* xviii).

Taking these three perspectival adjustments into account, the essays in *De/Colonizing the Subject* ranging in a variety of topics distributed geographically around the globe strive to contribute to discussions on a wide range of issues in the field of postcolonial life-writing. However, as Moore-Gilbert (xv) writes, the book includes a “considerable and sympathetic attention to autobiographical work by western women colonisers,” who sometimes held a derogatory standpoint towards the colonized subject (men and women). These standpoints are quite similar to the standpoints held by colonizing men towards the colonized subject.

In other critical studies of autobiography the devotion to postcolonial life-writing has been marginal, as Moore-Gilbert (xvi) reports. For instance, in books such as *Auto/biographical Discourse* by Laura Marcus (1994), and *Autobiography* (2001) by Linda Anderson as two significant examples of the study of the genre, the space allocated to non-Western autobiographers and postcolonial discourse is very small. Emphasizing the lack of postcolonial critique in Autobiography Studies, Moore-Gilbert endeavors to draw attention to this field and expands the area of scrutiny and critical discussion of non-Western life-writing.

As Moore-Gilbert observes, feminist studies of autobiography have some commonalities that can be shown in three major areas. These are the areas in which women's autobiographies are distinguished from men's. And "man" here refers to the western and not the postcolonial subject. Moore-Gilbert lists these three areas as: "first, thematics of subjectivity; second, issues of form; and third, questions surrounding the social function/cultural politics of life/writing" (xvii). In the following, some of these areas are explained and further elaborated.

The first area is thematics of subjectivity, from which three sub-categories can be derived: Firstly, critics have asserted the idea that "women's life-writing is characterised by a rejection of the model of sovereign, centred, unified Selfhood allegedly constructed in western male autobiography" (Moore-Gilbert xviii). This model of a centered unified self is something that has been valued from the beginning of Autobiography Studies, namely, from the first phase and partially into the third one (xviii). This evaluation prioritized canonical life-writings such as Augustine and Rousseau, and penalized those that were not written similarly. Women's life-writings, which were characterized as fragmented and thus representing an un-unified selfhood, were considered to be in this latter group.

Secondly, feminist critics suggest that canonical autobiographers have presented an autonomous self in their writings, whereas women portray themselves in relation to others in a social context of their outside world (Moore-Gilbert xviii). Giving examples of these "other"s, Mary G. Mason in her article about autobiographies of women writers discusses that a woman's husband, her children, or even a divine figure like Christ or God can fall into this category. Taking the example of Rousseau's *Confessions*, Mason explains how an egoistic male self is established throughout his autobiography and how in contrast, a female self would establish herself in her life-writing:

[T]he egoistic secular archetype that Rousseau handed down to his Romantic brethren in his *Confessions*, shifting the dramatic presentation to an unfolding self-discovery where characters and events are little more than aspects of the author's evolving consciousness, finds no echo in women's writing about their lives. On the contrary, [...] the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other." (321)

Thirdly, there is the issue of the body and the way women, in contrast to men, have projected corporeality in their autobiographies (Moore-Gilbert xviii). Where Western “high” cultures consider self as “continuity and coherence of consciousness rather than of the physical body,” Shirley Neuman points out how “mind, masculinity, culture” are contrasted with “body, femininity, nature” and how these dichotomies strengthen the idea that a male autobiographer is less likely to write his corporeality (Neuman 416). The same cultures and their patriarchal clichés associate the women’s world with embodiment and highlight their somatic aspects. Nonetheless, knowing the risks of possibly reaffirming the patriarchal norms, numerous female autobiographers have underlined “the constitutive role of a (reconceptualised) discourse of embodiment to women’s subjectivity” (Moore-Gilbert xviii).

Moore-Gilbert (xx) suggests the three thematics of subjectivity that critics have discovered in women’s life-writings can also be found in autobiographies of the postcolonial subject, whether male or female. These three thematics of subjectivity as discussed before, are the fragmented self, the relational self, and the attention to the physical body.

Moreover, there are other aspects that play crucial roles in life-writings of postcolonial subjects. One such is the “geo-cultural location”, which is constitutive in shaping the identity of the non-Western autobiographer. In fact, the geo-cultural location is rarely seen as that important in, for instance, Western women’s life-writings, with the exception of writings by the working-class women. (Dis)location also becomes a vital issue to write about in postcolonial autobiographies (Moore-Gilbert xxi).

Protest literature is another feature in some postcolonial life-writings. Writing with the intention of making changes in the status quo of the local community, homeland or host country (in the case of immigrants), is one of the major objectives of the postcolonial autobiographer. Moore-Gilbert (xxiii) highlights the difference between the postcolonial subjects in various locations. Depending on whether the postcolonial subject is located inside a place where he or she is deprived of his or her rights or is actually in exile away from the reach of suppressive regimes, the forms of protest and the features of writing can differ for the autobiographer.

What I attempt to do in the course of this dissertation is to explore two thematics of subjectivity that Moore-Gilbert highlights in postcolonial life-writings, namely, **the**

embodied self and **the relational self** in autobiographies of Azar Nafisi: *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and *Things I've Been Silent About*. But first a brief overview of memoir writing by Iranian women inside the homeland, and outside the country will be presented.

1.3. Autobiographies of Iranian Women

1.3.1. Autobiographies of Iranian Women inside Iran

Farzaneh Milani, in her article “Veiled Voices: Women’s Autobiographies in Iran”, discusses why Iranians during the past hundred and fifty years did not welcome autobiography as a genre of writing about the self and revealing the inner side. The reasons are variable and will be discussed in detail. In short, Milani summarizes them in three words: “deindividualization, protection, and restraint” (Milani 2).

Milani enumerates examples in Persian culture, where the self-concealment has taken place in private and is clandestine from public. For instance, Dash Akol, the very masculine figure in Sadegh Hedayat’s works of literature, talks to his parrot and confesses to it. Nasir al-Din Shah finds solace in talking with his cat, and the first Imam of Shi’ites is believed to express his sufferings during the nights by talking to a well in palm fields (Milani 3).

Iranian folk culture also provides a good amount of common proverbs and anecdotes that advise to keep the private face to oneself and reveal always a pleasant, delighted face to the public. Proverbs such as “save face”, “keep the face red with a slap”, or “protect appearance” all denote to this fact, as Milani (2) mentions. Another group of proverbs reminds Iranians that one should always be aware that nothing could be safe from the eyes and ears of the others. With all the protection to conceal the self, it could be exposed one day to the public, as Milani writes: “The restriction on open verbal disclosure increases the need for alternative mediums of communication: eyes pry, penetrate, infiltrate; mouths compulsively rumorize; crows turn into gossip mongers, unruly tattle-talers; and walls –those armors for protection—grow ears” (Milani 3).

From an Islamic point of view, clothing is not to reveal one's body, but to cover, keeping it from attentions, and mitigate the sexual enticement. For instance, in Persian the verb *pushidan* (to dress), as Milani explains, "means to cover up, to conceal from view, whereas the English term means, among other things, to decorate, to adorn" (4). Nonetheless, in the Islamic Sharia, covering of one's body and self is applied differently to women versus men. Men can be more visible in public than women. Whether it is due to the traditional patriarchy of the culture, or because of the Islamic notions of the veil, largely throughout history, Iranian women have been kept more to themselves, and their bodies are expected to be covered in public.

Giving an example, in an Islamic anecdote that Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet, mentions in his glorious book of poems, *Masnavi*, the prophet of Islam advises his male friends and followers "not to cover their bodies from the breeze of the Spring, because it does the same thing with your body as it does with trees [i.e. rejuvenates it]." Men are free to expose their body and soul, but women should treat their bodies differently. Milani gives an example in Persian culture from Leyli, the famous beloved of classical Iranian literature, who blatantly laments this culture that expects women to be silent: "He is a man, I am a woman!...He can talk and cry and express the deepest feelings in his poems. But I? I am a prisoner. I have no one to whom I can talk, no one to whom I can open my heart: shame and honor would be my fate" (Nizami qtd. in Milani 4).

As a matter of fact, writing autobiographically in Iran is way more challenging for women than men. The customs and traditions that expect women to be veiled, covered, and belong to the private sphere expect them not to reveal themselves verbally. Milani believes that this is the reason why "no veiled woman has ever published the details of her personal life, let alone a novel or an autobiography, whereas unveiled women have published a substantial number of both genre"(5). Although this statement is not an accurate one (because throughout the history of Iran there have been veiled women who have published both novels and memoirs), still to some extent it depicts a tendency among Iranian women: a higher inclination to write and disclose oneself in writing among unveiled women than veiled ones.

This observation that autobiography has not been a successful genre of writing about the self among Iranians might seemingly be true. Having said that, not choosing this genre of writing for presenting the self does not mean one is incapable of writing in that

genre. Thus, this observation is not in line with the Eurocentric ideas of early critical figures of Autobiography Studies. This statement does not reinforce what Misch and Gusdorf believed in their observations to be true because in their belief, non-Westerns are not capable of writing about their selves since they simply do not have “complicated phenomena of mental life” (Misch 18). The reason why this genre did not flourish inside Iran is not related to Iranians having complicated mental lives or not, but rather to the socio-political status as well as cultural conventions of the country.

There have been autobiographical accounts of Iranian men in the form of travel writings, memoirs, and life-writings going back centuries, even before Islam. Bert G. Fragner in his book, *Persische Memoirenliteratur: Als Quelle Zur Neueren Geschichte Irans*, presents a brief historical overview of famous memoirists and travel writers of Iran and enumerates many autobiographers of the region. Unlike Milani, Fragner does not think autobiography is an ignored genre of writing among Iranians, especially during the past two centuries, during which Iranians have been producing numerous examples of life-writings. Nonetheless, most are the production of the twentieth century (Fragner 4).

The subjects of these travel-writings are mostly travel accounts of Iranians to Europe and what they present to their readers are challenges and experiences of Iranians in Western countries. These travel journals also include a fair amount of significant information about the history of Iranian diplomacy. Moreover, they often contain numerous detailed historical information that has not been recorded in any other genres of writing (Fragner 5).

The memoirs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries written by Iranian men usually have political themes, reporting on political events and occasions of the time, and describing the meetings between the autobiographer and politicians. Those memoirs that are short in length are usually related to the period of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (i.e. early 1900s), whereas the lengthy ones often deal with the various vocations and positions in which the life-writer has been engaged during his lifetime—most of them illustrate informative accounts about the methods and styles of governing the country in that era (Fragner 5-6).

The nineteenth- and twentieth-century travel-writings and memoirs of Iranian men considerably influenced Persian prose writing. All of these works are written in fluent

simple prose, sometimes close to the vernacular language. They have distanced themselves from the elaborated Persian prose that was used for centuries and had elements of formality and literariness, mostly originated from the language used by secretaries of royal courts. The modern simple prose style of these travel writings affected Persian literature; hence these works can be accounted as first examples of modern Persian literature (Fragner 6).

As Fragner explains, the flourishing of the genre of life-writing during the 19th and 20th centuries in Iran should not imply that the genre was the production of only this era. The tradition of writing travel accounts in Islamic countries, including Iran, goes back to the medieval times. Arab travel-writers such as Abū Dulaf Mis'ar, and Ibn Fadlan (10th century), Al-Idrisi and Ibn Gubair (12th century), Al-Tigani, and Ibn Battuta (early 14th century) are well-known along with Turkish travel-writers of the Ottoman Empire. In Persian literature, travel writings of Nasir Khusraw (date of death: 1088), who left Iran to visit Egypt of the Fatimid period is worth mentioning and is one of the great gems of Persian literature. Later on, in the Safavid era (1501-1722) travel accounts of Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, who left Iran as an ambassador to Siam, is an example of the genre (Fragner 8-9).

Apart from travel-writings, the life-writings of Iranians can also be found in forms of memoirs and autobiographies throughout the history. The variable classic Arab memoirs were influenced by traditions of Iranians before Islam, namely in the Sassanid era. An example is the autobiographical account of Borzoe (531-578), the Persian physician of the Sassanid era, which continued to be influential in the Islamic world during medieval ages (Fragner 9).

Based on an old Iranian tradition originating before Islam, many Iranian kings wrote accounts of their lives. Fragner mentions several examples of this genre that Rosenthal has cited and called "Kings Memoirs" (Rosenthal qtd. in Fragner 10). These examples are: *Timur's Apocryphal Memoirs* (which is fabricated); Babur-namah's memoir; Tuzuk-i Gahangiri (date of death: 1628), and famous accounts of Qajar kings in the 19th and 20th century, as well as the memoir of Muhammad Riza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran (Fragner 10).

Compared to Iranian men, Iranian women inside the country have written and produced fewer life-writings throughout history. But when they did, they did not only write about

themselves and their personal lives, but also showed consciousness on women's social and cultural status in family, religion, and society, discussed women's rights, and talked about issues of self-representation.

One of the early memoirs like this is that of Taj os-Saltaneh, daughter of Nasir al-Din Shah, written "around 1914, when she was about thirty years old" (Najmabadi 21). One of the major differences of this autobiography with its counterparts in the genre is the emphasis that Taj os-Saltaneh lays on the nature of her writing as being autobiography and not a social or historical account that many memoirs claimed to maintain (Najmabadi 21). For Taj os-Saltaneh, writing about one's self may even be more valuable than reading the history of others. When a teacher of Taj os-Saltaneh recommends her to read history in order to "avoid depressive self-speculation" she responds:

Ah! My dear teacher and cousin! Do you imagine that I should busy myself with the history of others, while my own past and my present situation are themselves a bewildering and disagreeable history? (p.5). The teacher remains skeptical: "Ah! A history centered around one's person, in all its good and bad consequences of that experience! No! I do not consider that history" (p.5). But Taj os-Saltaneh insists: "My history is so important and so full of difficult events that if, over the course of a full year, I were to tell you of all the hours of my life, it would still not be finished. And it is sometimes so sad, at other times so jolly, that it would surprise the listener" (p.6). (Najmabadi 21-22)

Taj os-Saltaneh was a well-read woman and an avid reader of classical Persian literature. Besides, she knew French and was familiar with European literature and history. Like some other Iranian women of the time, she had awareness of "the suffragette movements in Europe and America, as well as of the reforms adopted for women in the Ottoman Empire and in Egypt" (Najmabadi 24).

All of Taj os-Saltaneh's readings and engagements with literature, history and culture of Iran, Middle East and also Europe had made great marks on her autobiographical writing. Her personal life experiences were other factors to make her character and her writings distinguishable. As the daughter of one of the most powerful Qajar monarchs, Nasir al-Din Shah, and having the experience of a married life in her early youth, and

being familiar with women's lives in "andarun"⁴, she had a position to be at once privileged and have access to the world of literacy and culture, as well as the ability to empathize with other women as she also suffered from difficulties that women (compared to men) had to challenge and deal with in their lives (Najmabadi 22-24).

Apart from her independent ideas on many socio-political as well as economical issues of Iran at that time, Taj os-Saltaneh's remarks on women and their position in society is worth highlighting. These liberating ideas, which were also advocated by enlightened men of the time, included access to education for women, unveiling to facilitate women with more freedom in the society, and opposing arranged marriage for women (Najmabadi 24-26).

Nevertheless, as Najmabadi writes, unlike some arguments by the enlightened men who underlined the position of women as mothers and wives, Taj os-Saltaneh takes a very progressive stand and has a different viewpoint on women. Najmabadi writes, "Taj os-Saltaneh's arguments locate the woman herself, rather than the children or the husband, at the center of the argument. She argues for female education not simply to make women better mothers but also to help them gain employment and end their 'empty, futile lives'" (Najmabadi 26).

Compared to the previous eras, the twentieth century perceived a rise in the number of life-writings of Iranian women. Early life accounts in this century can be traced to a memoir of a singer and dancer, Mahvash, and also the life-writing of a political activist, Malekeh E'tezadi. Both discuss their non-traditional lives in a conventional society (Milani 12).

Iranian women with various political backgrounds and views from different social classes wrote about their lives. As Milani reports, among these autobiographical works, writings of Ashraf Dehqani (a political activist), Sorayya Bakhtiar (the second wife of Muhammad Riza Shah Pahlavi), Marzieh Osku'i (a Marxist revolutionary), and Ashraf Pahlavi (twin sister of Muhammad Riza Shah Pahlavi) could be mentioned. Women with different points of view towards religion have attempted to write their memoirs. As

⁴ "Andarun or ANDARŪNĪ (inside) [is] the private quarters of well-to-do houses in contrast to *bīrūnī* [...], the public rooms usually reserved for men." (*Encyclopaedia Iranica*)

an example of an Islamist religious woman, Parvin Nowbakht (whose husband was a martyr in the Iran-Iraq war) published her diary in the years following the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Secular women were also among those who wrote their autobiographies in Iran (Milani 12).

Milani (12) believes that although these various autobiographies written by women do not necessarily share common socio-political or religious background, they all share “a sense of self deeply rooted in the public domain.” Milani further advances her argument as below:

[These autobiographies] are devoted mainly to the defense of a political career, a religious cause, a notorious life. Resembling beefed-up curriculum vitae, most if not all, of them are purposive, characterized by one major preoccupation or another. Although their time frame is often stretched by means of free association, flash backs, and flash forwards to cover a whole life, most of the works have the manifest intent of recording the unfolding of a specific event. (Milani 12-13)

Michael Hillmann in his article “An Autobiographical Voice: Forugh Farrokhzad” explores the popularity of the genre of life-writing among men and women of the Iranian literary world. Like other groups and sections, here men’s autobiographies outnumber significantly those of women’s. If the Iranian male literary figure is hidden under the mask, to the Iranian female literary figure both mask and veil apply. These masks and veils discourage writers from revealing details of their personal lives and encourage them to self-censor themselves. Both men and women writers may self-mask, however, “women would naturally face greater social risks in being candid in writing than would men” (Hillmann 34-39).

Hillmann also sheds light on the difference between two groups of Iranian women autobiographers in the manners in which they attempt to appeal to the readers. In his opinion, women appearing as celebrities of political sphere, such as Ashraf Pahlavi, Soraya Bakhtiar, or even Taj os-Saltaneh wrote their autobiographies based on their relationship with men. This reason is not relevant to women of the literary world, because their achievements are based on themselves not their menfolk (Hillmann 40).

One such example of a female literary figure who attempted to write autobiographically and resisted masks and veils is the Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967). Her

first volume of poetry was published in 1955. It was for the first time that a female voice was recognizable as a persona in Persian literature. She was the first Iranian woman who wrote and published her poems on her own (Hillmann 41).

Farrokhzad, who married at seventeen, was shortly divorced after the birth of his only child, was an independent intellectual woman, who experienced life as a poet as well as a film-maker. Farrokhzad, who lived a dramatic love life, was a philanthropic character who lived for a while with a leper colony and made a documentary on them that won international awards. A mother deprived of seeing her son, Farrokhzad adopted an orphan boy and raised him like her own child. These aspects of Farrokhzad's personality were more modern than many of her contemporary Iranian women's.

Hillmann (52) remarks how literary critics refer to Farrokhzad not using a pen name or her surname, as it was the case for other modernist male poets, but rather by her given name, Forugh. This is due to the fact that Forugh herself did not use any pen name; which was also very revolutionary in a society where it was not proper to call a woman in public by her given name, as Milani writes, "Just as in the Qur'an, no woman other than Mary, mother of Jesus, is referred to by name, traditional men would prefer not even to mention their women's names in front of strangers. A woman's proper name is improper in public" (Milani 5).

Nevertheless, William Hanaway in his article "Half-Voices: Persian Women's Lives and Letters" argues conversely. Unlike Hillmann, he does not consider Forugh's works of poetry autobiographical. In Hanaway's perspective, the autobiography defined in the West will not accept Forugh's poems as an example of the genre. In the Western tradition, "[t]he autobiographer looks back from middle or old age and interprets the facts of his or her life, shaping them into an overall pattern which gives meaning to them as a whole" (Hanaway 58-59). What degrades Forugh's poetry from belonging to the genre of life-writing is the lack of a unified narrative that Hanaway's Western tradition expects the autobiographer to maintain. The "scattered 'facts'" that one finds in Forugh's poetry, in Hanaway's opinion, are no more than "a matter of association, allusion, and inference" (Hanaway 59).

Hanaway's Western-centered ideas are omnipresent throughout his arguments regarding the ways Iranians consider autobiographies and biographies. He sets out models for Iranians to look at and be inspired by. He mentions biographies of men, "all larger than

life: many have become the subject of legend or even myth” (60). Surprisingly enough, among these larger than life historical characters that Hanaway lists appears Alexander the Great. His life, in Hanaway’s perspective, “is used as an example of ideal kingship and of the values that Iranian associate with that institution” (60). It is ironic that in Hanaway’s Eurocentric view, Alexander the Great, a Western man of power, who invaded Iran, burned Persepolis—the ancient Persian city—and overthrew the king of Persia, could be set up as a model for modern Iranians.

Hanaway’s reasoning is highly in line with Misch’s and Gusdorf’s when it comes to analyzing the reasons why autobiography and biography have been neglected as genres of writing about the self in Iranian culture. He argues,

The reason may be that autobiography is more of a cultural form than a literary genre capable of being transplanted and flourishing in non-Western literary traditions. Autobiography owes a great deal to post-Renaissance thought about the worth of an individual and the uniqueness of a human life. Research on autobiographical memory has confirmed that memory is a narrative, and that writing about one’s own past is always reconstructive rather than recollective. History and biography acknowledge the fallibility of memory, but autobiography depends on one’s own memory to reconstruct a past that may be true but may not be accurate. (Hanaway 61-62)

Additionally, Hanaway reasons that “if memory is a narrative, its structure must be influenced by the structure of other constructed narratives in a culture, the most conspicuous being prose fiction” (Hanaway 62). Traditional Persian prose in Hanaway’s perspective is not qualified to satisfy the necessities of a desired narrative model for writing autobiographies. Western-style narratives also do not play a role here because it “is not yet sufficiently internalized in the Persian mind to provide the structures for the literary narration of the events of one’s own life in the Western fashion” (62).

Hanaway concludes his article by emphasizing once again his Eurocentric approaches to autobiography as a genre emerging from ideas about self in countries that have experienced Renaissance in their history: “After all, Iran did not experience the Renaissance, and while classical thought is one element in Iranian culture, it is not, as in the West, the basic substratum” (Hanaway 62). It is surprising how these Western-centered minds and ideas still are to be found in decades after the first and second

phases of Autobiography Studies, when critics of the field have already been familiar with postcolonial ideas and frameworks of analyzing life-writings.

1.3.2. Autobiographies of Iranian Women in Diaspora

During the years following the publication of *Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran* that included articles by Milani, Hillmann, and Hanaway, who all mentioned to some extent the neglect of writing autobiographies by Iranians, especially women, Western countries observed a flourishing of the genre among Iranians—especially women—in Diaspora. Life-writings of members of political groups, writers, intellectuals, and even individuals without any specific labels became visible in the publishing industry in the West.

The number of these autobiographical volumes increased dramatically after 9/11, when there was an urge to reconstruct the face that was demolished by Western media and its political agenda, specifically by the American one. Women of the Iranian Diaspora felt the necessity to write and tell the narrative of the individual who had left her home country for various reasons and was now ready to articulate herself. The silent Iranian woman was now to uncover and unveil herself in front of the Western gaze. More and more women wrote and published their memoirs in languages other than their mother tongues, for readers who were different from those in their home country, hardly sharing any cultural background. In her book, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock writes,

By the summer of 2005 Iranian memoirs were in vogue and circulating to critical praise and wide readership in North America. One in particular was a best-seller,...: Azar Nafisi's *Reading 'Lolita' in Tehran*. Also highly acclaimed were Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoirs, both translated from the French originals, *Persepolis* (2003) and *Persepolis 2* (2004). These are notable among a series of other recent memoir: Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No* (2004), Said's *Landscape of Distant Mother* (2004), and Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (2004), among others. (Whitlock 161)

Among the six volumes of autobiography that Whitlock enumerates, five are written by Iranian women and only one is by an Iranian man, albeit the list of memoirs written and

published by Iranian women in Diaspora goes beyond this number. Whitlock categorizes these as autobiographies of a generation “recalling the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its Aftermath. They bring that traumatic memory back into the present, as troubled relations between the United States and Iran reemerge” (161). But the Iranian Diasporic autobiographies include more than one generation and are not limited only to the ones mentioned above.

Daughters of the Iranian Diaspora have also struggled with this genre of self-writing and self-narrating. Autobiographical works like Tara Bahrapour’s *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (1999), Azadeh Moaveni’s two memoirs, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005) and *Honeymoon in Tehran: Two Years of Love and Danger in Iran* (2009) are worth mentioning. The autobiographies of the second generation of Iranian Diaspora have a basic distinction from those of the first group. The second generation autobiographers do not use English as their second language, but as their mother tongue, articulating themselves with less language difficulties than the first group. They have usually lived the culture in which they publish for its readers, whereas members of the first generation of Iranian Diaspora encountered the culture of the host countries in a different way: Persian is their mother tongue and they use English as a second language.

Babak Elahi and Persis Karim in their article “Introduction: Iranian Diaspora” endeavor to present an overview of the usages and definitions of the term Diaspora and its meaning in relevance to the Iranian community outside their homeland. They consider the term Diaspora attributed to Iranians who left Iran between the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the end of Iran and Iraq in 1988. Although there are no accurate statistics of the number of Iranians who left Iran during this period, an estimation of three million people are assumed to have emigrated from Iran between 1979 and 1985. Elahi and Karim report, “It is only in 2010, for example, that there was an attempt to self-identify Iranians (and Iranian Americans) on the census count in the United States, which has the highest population of Iranian immigrants” (Elahi and Karim 81).

If the Iranian Diaspora of North America has the highest population of Iranian immigrants and exiles in the world, it is not astonishing that the autobiographies emerging in English could constitute a significant body of work to study for critics and scholars of Autobiography Studies. Furthermore, it is worth recalling the specific

relationship between Iran and the United States. As Withlock observes, “[e]xilic memoir brings to the surface a long history of fascination, mourning, obsession, and copresence that is an ongoing subtext in both Iranian and American imaginaries” (Withlock 162).

The long history of mistrust and hostility between Iran and the United States starting from the infamous coup of 1953, which led to a change in the political status of Iran from a constitutional to an authoritative monarchist state, has witnessed many events and historically critical moments. Supported and planned by the Intelligence Services of the United States and United Kingdom, the 1953 coup bolstered the political position of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi as a king, relying not on his own people but on Western countries, and specifically on the United States’ support. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran ended this relationship in a dramatic way. The hostage taking of the American embassy in Iran between 1979 and 1981 led to a formal end to the political relationship between the two countries. Neither of the two countries have an embassy in the other country, and since then all the supposedly diplomatic communication have been held either through public media or under-the-table.

The political interventions of the United States in the Middle East, such as the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the Invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the Iraq war of 2003, led many Iranians to have insecure feelings of being threatened and surrounded by the physical military presence of the United States in the region. Talk of war and imposed sanctions of all kinds on Iran by the United States has had a direct impact on the lives of Iranians inside and outside the country.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the communication between these two nations, their writers, artists, or ordinary people is blocked. Both Americans and Iranians have access to each other’s cultural products. American authors are translated into Persian and are published in Iran. Iranian immigrants who form the Iranian Diaspora also have tried to break the silence by writing articles, novels, and autobiographies. Talking of autobiographies, Whitlock writes, “[t]hese Iranian memoirs occupy a specific subculture that is shaped by their origins in a turbulent period of Iranian history and culture and by the geopolitical grid of the war on terror that determines their production and reception as valued commodities in the United States now” (162).

The exilic memoirs of Iranian women have received attention and popularity among Americans as well as other Western readers. Especially after 9/11 with the rising discourse of binaries such as East/West and Islam/Christianity, once again postcolonial frameworks and issues of critique were underlined in the academia, publishing industry, and to some extent in pop culture. Autobiographers of the Middle East, who had experienced life in the Orient, suddenly felt the necessity of narrating their own life story. A lack of communication among cultures was noticeable, and bridging this gap was felt as a matter of urgency. Witnesses, refugees, and immigrants began to talk and write about themselves and the publishing industry welcomed this new wave. The readership's quench for the "truest" stories was insatiable. Questions of fact or fiction were posed repeatedly. Representation was now a significant concern for both autobiographers and their co-members in Diaspora.

The Iranian autobiographers in Diaspora all deal with issues of representation either in their writings or after the publication of their memoirs. What is allowed to be represented as the truest version of history, culture, and politics inside and outside of Iran? What is truth anyway? What do we consider as truth and what do we call fiction? "Should our understanding of the truth be assembled from the testimony of many, or is truth best expressed by the experience of the individual?" (Motlagh17). These and many other questions as such have been asked frequently by critics of Autobiography Studies, members of the Iranian Diaspora, and the readership of Iranian exilic memoirs.

Regarding the issue of language in writing memoirs: members of the Iranian Diaspora, who were considered as the first generation, selected languages other than their mother tongue in order to communicate with a Western readership. This raises issues in postcolonial discussions about the role of language in postcolonial literature, for the postcolonial author writing in the language of the (former) colonizer suggests the author feels inferior to the power of the colonizer. Language as a means of power can be a strong barrier for the postcolonial author who aims to reclaim her indigenous identity and liberate her colonized, or once colonized, nation.

The Iranian autobiographer in Diaspora, however, has never experienced an imposed Western language in her homeland, Iran, since the country was never directly colonized. Consequently, there was no need to establish a Western administrative system, which would have required standardizing a Western language in Iran. Therefore, writing in

their mother tongue necessarily does not have the same meaning for the Iranian author as it does for the postcolonial author whose country was directly influenced and run by the Western administrative system. Iranian women in Iran are colonized by the country's old patriarchy; when in exile, they are neo-colonized in the Orientalist discourse of Western media and culture.

Hence, Iranian women in Diaspora, always being discussed in the West but never given the space to be listened to, are now ready to speak for themselves. In order to bridge the gap, they choose the language of the Western audience to write autobiographically. Nevertheless, they are never free from the barriers of the Western language by which they communicate, to articulate themselves and to construct their subjectivity, despite their fear and possibility of miscommunication. The point is, the Iranian autobiographer in Diaspora cannot write and publish freely inside her homeland, as she would be censored. She chooses freedom, and the payoff is, among other things, struggling with the language barrier.

To summarize, in this chapter after defining some key-terms in Autobiography Studies, a historical overview of the field from the postcolonial perspective is offered. Moore-Gilbert, comparing the history of feminist Autobiography Studies with its postcolonial counterpart, shows how the latter can benefit and learn from the former. As Moore-Gilbert (xx) remarks, three thematics of subjectivity that critics have found in women's life-writings—the fragmented self, the relational self, and the embodied self—are also present in postcolonial autobiographies.

The rest of Chapter 1 presents an overview of the history of women's life-writings in Iran and in Diaspora. The flourishing of the genre among Iranian women in Diaspora—in comparison with their counterparts in Iran—sheds light on many critical and political issues that are raised in presenting the self to others. The once silent—or silenced—Iranian woman, now distanced from her homeland, is eloquently articulate in front of the Western gaze, and is eager to share her life narrative despite the cultural difference that she feels with her readership, and also despite the language barriers.

The highlighted dichotomies of East/West and Islam/Christianity in the discourse following 9/11 cast light on the lack of communication among cultures, religions, and ethnicities. To fill this gap, members of Diaspora were among the ones who made efforts to present their “truest” representation of the East to the West. One such group

that was actively present in this clarification discourse is the Iranian Diaspora of North America—with the highest population of Iranian immigrants around the world. Hence, it is not astonishing that the autobiographies emerging in English language constitute a significant body of work to study for scholars of the field. One of the pioneers of writing this genre among Iranian women in Diaspora is Azar Nafisi with her two memoirs, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), and *Things I've Been Silent About* (2008).

In the following chapters two thematics of subjectivity proposed by Moore-Gilbert will be discussed in Nafisi's memoirs. These are the issues of body and embodiment in presenting the Self, and the autobiographer's relational self.

Chapter 2. Issues of the Body in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

2.1. The Embodied Self

This chapter aims to study issues of the body and embodiment in presentation of the autobiographical self. By reviewing the notion of corporeality, I will discuss why this aspect of selfhood was neglected throughout the history of Autobiography Studies; why some autobiographers focused on body and embodiment, and how corporeality is reflected in Iranian women's life-writings, in particular, in memoir of a member of Diaspora, namely Azar Nafisi. Most of this chapter is an analysis of the autobiographer's corporeal selfhood in *Reading Lolita* and the discourse that Nafisi constructs in order to decolonize the body in her text.

The dichotomy of body/soul is one of the oldest opposing binaries of the self in frameworks that address the self and strive to explore its existential dimensions. Shirley Neuman in her article "Autobiography, Bodies, Manhood" suggests reasons for the absence of body references in works of autobiographers who believe the lives in life-writings are embodied. One such reason is the mindset of "a Platonic tradition which opposes the mental/spiritual to the corporeal and then identifies 'self' with the spiritual." Not only that, the Platonic tradition also beholds spirit on a higher position than body. Soul can be divine, whereas body belongs to humans and thus remains worldly and mortal (Neuman 415).

Smith and Watson, however, argue that autobiographical subjectivity can hardly be imagined without the embodiment of the physical body. The body is "a site of autobiographical knowledge" and it is a "textual surface upon which a person's life is inscribed." Memory is also embodied and it is through the physicality of the brain and the body that the autobiographer can experience the world and receive its materiality. But, more than that, "the narrating body is situated at a nexus of language, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other specificities, and autobiographical narratives mine this embodied locatedness" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 37-38).

From the beginning, religions in particular have debated the body/soul dichotomy: some of them elevating the spirit, others elevating the body, and still others respecting both as parallel and equally valuable dimensions of the self. Furthermore, in religious discussion various dimensions of existence such as physics/metaphysics, their relation to each other, and how they affect or should affect one another are also matters of debate.

Christianity, for instance, suggests body and soul are opposites. Body is the soul's prison, "a miserable container that constrains the freedom of its far more valuable contents" (Finke 403). Unlike God, humans with their bodily existence experience suffering, yearning, and corporeality. The body with its limits and boundaries is a constraint and barrier on the way towards deity (Finke 403).

The duality of body/soul exists to some extent also in Islam. Nonetheless, in Islamic theology body is not thoroughly abandoned and it could be a means of elevating soul. Through establishing regulations, Islam places body as a site capable of experiencing eligible pleasures at certain circumstances and situations. This regulation is, however, gendered and is applied differently for men versus women. From an essentialist perspective, body is defined as a means of exploring the world through which men and women should and are allowed to experience material and physical pleasures. Despite being a divine gift, they always should remember that their body is reminiscent of the Fall from paradise, a means of committing sin. It was for satisfying a bodily craving that Adam and Eve⁵ disobeyed the divine rule and committed sin.

In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault presents a history of various judicial, cultural, religious, and militant treatments of the body in France. The body, as Foucault mentions, has a political dimension and hence, it is used and abused for the benefit of power. As he writes, the body is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault 25). Therefore, talking of body is a political act and can be interpreted

⁵ Islam blames **both** Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit: "And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise and eat therefrom in [ease and] abundance from wherever you will. But do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers.' But Satan caused them to slip out of it and removed them from that [condition] in which they had been. And We said, 'Go down, [all of you], as enemies to one another, and you will have upon the earth a place of settlement and provision for a time.' (The Qur'an 2:35-36)

politically. It is intertwined with many socio/political aspects of the life of the author and the scholar. Writing about body, or even being silent about one's embodiment have both meaning and implication.

Moore-Gilbert observes that throughout the history of Autobiography Studies, there has been a deficiency in paying attention to embodiment as an aspect of subjectivity. Neither Misch nor Gusdorf emphasize the significance of embodiment in their studies of autobiographies. Embodiment is not an issue of consideration for them. What is worth studying, in their point of view, is the non-corporeal aspect of the self, i.e. the mind, the soul, the spirit. Misch insists on the value of the autobiographical subject's mind and spirit as a gate that permits the text to enter the canonical realm. Overlooking the body during the first and second phase, the third phase of Autobiography Studies also does not observe and analyze embodiment and issues of body in life-writings. For instance, works of scholars such as Spengemann, Olney, and Sprinker, who are prominent figures of the third phase, are dismissing of the embodied self and embodiment in general (Moore-Gilbert 34).

In feminist approaches to Autobiography Studies, scholars believe that the insufficiency of the studies on the body and embodiment in the history of life-writings is a gender related issue, "providing a further explanation for the historical marginalisation of women's life-writing" (Moore-Gilbert 35). Nevertheless, there are different views to this concern among feminists. Some, like Mary Mason, consider that women's experience is not in accordance with the perspective of canonical autobiographies such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which "the self is presented as the stage for a battle of opposing forces and where a climatic victory for one force—spirit defeating flesh—completes the drama of the self" (Mason 321). Gilmore also finds the exclusion of the body from the self in Autobiography Studies astonishing:

The mind/body split is reproduced through the public/private, outside/inside, male/female categories that order perception and experience and is derived from a way of knowing which cannot account for the knowledge of the body. Indeed, until feminist criticism, predominant ways of knowing defined the body's knowledge as that which is unknowable. The self has functioned as a metaphor for soul, consciousness, intellect, and imagination, but never for body.[...]. Many women autobiographers, however, have found the body to provide rich grounds for thinking through the relationship between identity and representation. (Gilmore 83-84)

The reason why body plays a significant role for feminist autobiographers is best articulated by Fedwa Malti-Douglas as Moore-Gilbert cites. The body for feminists is “a physical reality that in itself possesses no necessary moral or social meaning but is then invested with a moral value. This investment, in turn, dictates social conclusions” (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 35). Body is present in women’s life-writings and men’s autobiographies. But throughout history the connotations and meaning that the term implies, as well as rules and regulations that are forced by societies upon women’s bodies, are very different from men’s bodies. This distinction is highlighted by women autobiographers and feminist scholars in the field of Autobiography Studies.

Issues of body and embodiment, despite being a recent topic of research and study in women’s life-writings, play a substantial role in postcolonial Autobiography Studies. The study of the issue is highly relevant to the exilic memoirs, especially those written by women. The Diaspora itself is directly linked with the embodiment and dislocation of the body. A displaced body, either voluntarily or forcefully, is a body located in different settings than those it once occupied. The immigrant, the exile, the member of Diaspora is a person who has left the place she/he belonged to, and her/his body and soul are affected by this displacement. In some cases these bodies have suffered, in other cases, they have been liberated. The diasporic autobiographer, especially, if she is a woman coming from the Orient—as in the orientalist sense—has stories to tell about her body and embodiment of the self. Or she is expected to have such narratives to share with others. Whether she recounts such stories to her readers or remains silent about them, whether she writes consciously about her body or not, whether she covers the body in her text or obsessively uses it to convey certain meanings and associations, all choices are meaningful and significantly telling about the autobiographer’s subjectivity.

2.2. Embodiment in Autobiographies of Iranian Women in Diaspora: the Case of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Iranian women both in the homeland and in Diaspora have taken stands on the issues of body. They have been directly under the impact of various regulations imposed by tradition, religion, and most importantly, state. The body of the Iranian woman has

publicly been ruled throughout history. The female body and anything related to it belong to the realm of taboo, imprisoned by traditional constraints of patriarchy. The female body does not belong to one's self; it has to obey a certain set of conventions, restrictions, and rules.

Iranian women autobiographers in Diaspora compared to their counterparts in Iran have experienced freedom of speech in the host countries where they publish their work: the freedom that is not allowed inside their homeland. If women autobiographers in Iran have to be silent about the female body and the way it is treated, restricted and censored, women autobiographers in Diaspora, by contrast, have more freedom to write and narrate their embodiment, their personal corporeal experiences, and the invisibility/visibility of their body.

The female body and the restrictions imposed on it, as well as issues of embodiment of the self and others, play a substantial role in *Reading Lolita*. The memoir opens with images of presenting female bodies. The narrator is describing pictures she has taken on the last night of her stay in Tehran while friends and members of a reading group have gathered to give her assistance to pack, and say goodbye to her. The narrator describes them below:

In the first [picture] there are seven women, standing against a white wall. They are, according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall. Only they have taken off their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and the length of her hair. (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 4)

This is the first embodiment of *Reading Lolita*'s characters in the book. They appear first in a monolithic style: all wear black headscarves and the blackness is contrasted sharply with the white empty background of the wall. In the second picture they form colorful entities and become individuals who are distinguished from one another. Nafisi's description of veiled female bodies that unveil in front of the camera (and readers) repeatedly occurs throughout the memoir—each time with the same fresh amazement of the first time. As she herself writes, “almost every time, I could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into colors” (Nafisi 5-6).

The shock of unveiling, and discarding the unified black and white world of collective beings and entering the realm of colorful individual embodied selves is something that the narrator obsesses about. Individuality is one of the main objectives that is pursued in *Reading Lolita* and its absence is lamented. Nafisi writes, “[w]hen my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and shape, *becoming her own inimitable self*” [emphasis added] (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 6). In other words, Nafisi implies that uncovering and unveiling the body makes it unique, specific, and individual.

The search for individuality through regaining the body becomes the main quest and aim in *Reading Lolita*. Nafisi believes that the reason she chose Nabokov’s *Lolita* for her reading group was to show something more than the mere relationship of a grownup with an under-aged teenager. Clarifying her viewpoint of *Lolita* Nafisi writes, “[t]his was the story of a twelve-year-old girl who had nowhere to go. Humbert had tried to turn her into his fantasy, into his dead love, and he had destroyed her. The desperate truth of *Lolita*’s story is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual’s life by another*” (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 33). *Lolita*, above anything else, is the story of longing to confiscate the body: a young, fresh, and newly burgeoned body that takes its first steps in the land of sexuality. The authority of the much older male character, Humbert, over the young Lolita and the absolute desire to own what is not legitimately his reflects the idea of Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita*. Later on in the memoir, emphasizing this idea, Nafisi once again explains the reason for choosing *Lolita* for reading in her group in Tehran: “Why Lolita? Why Lolita in Tehran? I want to emphasize once more that we were not Lolita, the Ayatollah was not Humbert and this republic was not what Humbert called his principedom by the sea. Lolita was not [only] a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went *against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives*” (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 35) [emphasis added].

One of the key scholarly issues of talking about body and embodiment of the subject is the way this embodiment is realized by the subject. For Jacques Lacan the construction of ego from the early months of a child’s development occurs during the mirror-stage, when the self perceives her/his image in the mirror. Macey explains,

In the mirror-phase stage, the child identifies with its specular image, and this inaugurates the series of identifications that will construct the EGO. The child is literally captivated by a specular other thanks to an identification which is also

an alienation. The imaginary is thus the realm in which self and other merge, and in which identity is grounded in a mere semblance of unity. The imaginary is not a stage which is overcome or transcended, and is a constant presence in the lives of human SUBJECTS and in the stories they tell themselves and others about what they are. (Macey 200)

This mirror stage, or the confrontation of the self with its image, occurs for the first time in early childhood. However, this confrontation can occur repeatedly during a person's lifetime. Whenever she looks in the mirror, or at a photograph or portrait and sees her image, the ego becomes her subject. The constant presence of self-image can also be seen in *Reading Lolita*. However, the confrontation between self and its image is not easy and smooth. Nafisi observes this difficulty when she figuratively endeavors to hold a mirror in front of her female students so that they see their self-images. Recalling her first weeks of class when she asked her students questions that a friend in women's-studies program had sent her, Nafisi writes that in response to "[w]hat is your image of yourself?" one of her students had written, 'I am not ready for that question yet.' They were not ready –not yet" (*Reading Lolita* 38). Continuing psychological analysis of her students, Nafisi, like a psychoanalyst, meticulously observes and studies her girls: "[f]rom the beginning, I took notes, as if of an experiment" (38). Nafisi, noticing her student's self-analytical responses concludes, "[t]hroughout, from start to finish, I observe that they have no clear image of themselves; they can only see and shape themselves through other people's eyes- ironically, the very people they despise. I have underlined *love yourself, self-confidence*" (38).

On rare, unique occasions when girls of *Reading Lolita* are ready to confront a self-image of themselves, this image is clearly vivid and extremely symbolic, but at the same time very dark and depressing. Giving an example, the narrator describes a drawing that Sanaz, one of her students, had drawn after her jail experience at the Caspian seaside:

It is a simple drawing in black and white, of a naked girl, the white of her body caught in a black bubble. She is crouched in an almost fetal position, hugging one bent knee. Her other leg is stretched out behind her. Her long, straight hair follows the same curved line as the contour of her back, but her face is hidden. The bubble is lifted in the air by a giant bird with long black talons. What interests me is a small detail as opposed to the more obvious imagery of the girl, the bubble and the girl's hand that reaches out the bubble and holds on to the

talon. Her subservient nakedness is dependent on that talon, and she reaches out to it. (75)

Sanaz's drawing is the most visual of all the girls' self-images. Others describe their self-images verbally. One sees herself as "fog, moving over concrete objects, taking on their form but never becoming concrete herself" (75). Another one's image of herself is "a figment" (75). One of them defines herself in a lexicographical way, with the definition of the word "paradox" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In all of the cases, Nafisi realizes how this self-image of the girls is constructed above all, contextually. She writes, "[i]mplicit in almost all their descriptions was the way they saw themselves in the context of an outside reality that prevented them from defining themselves clearly and separately" (75-76).

Color, as an aspect of embodiment and physicality, is also described as an identifying feature of individuality in *Reading Lolita*. The first instance is described early in this section, when the narrator compares two images of her girls, one in veil, and the other one unveiled. The former is illustrated in a unity of black and white. The latter is colorful, and therefore, individualized. Again, the same attitude towards color, and hence, individuality of the subject is described in the following passage:

The Islamic Republic coarsened my taste in colors, Mana said, fingering the discarded leaves of her roses. I want to wear outrageous colors, like shocking pink or tomato red. I feel too greedy for colors to see them in carefully chosen words of poetry. Manna was one of those people who would experience ecstasy but not happiness. Come here, I want to show you something, I said, leading her into our bedroom. When I was very young, I was obsessed with the colors of places and things my father told me about in his nightly stories. I wanted to know the color of Scheherazade's dress, her bedcover, the color of the genie and the magic lamp, and once I asked him about the color of paradise. He said it could be any color I wanted it to be. That was not enough. Then one day when we had guests and I was eating my soup in the dining room, my eyes fell on a painting I had seen on the wall ever since I could remember, and I instantly knew the color of my paradise. And here it is, I said, proudly pointing to a small oil painting in an old wooden frame: a green landscape of lush, leathery leaves with two birds, two deep red apples, a golden pear and a touch of blue." (14)

Consequently, the craving for color in *Reading Lolita* is the call for individuality and freedom. The more intensified and outrageous the colors are, the more vividly the self outstands and is separated from the imposed unified, homogeneous background. This

even extends to help imagining the embodiment of the world of fables, mythology and dreams. Colors are essential parts of the reality that one strives to construct: the reality of self, and its imagination.

Another distinguishing aspect of embodiment is to be found in places and space of *Reading Lolita*. Space is seen as an embodied physical existence. The individual space is the one that is veiled from public. In describing the place where members of Nafisi's reading group gather to discuss books, the narrator explains, "[o]ur world in that living room with its window framing my beloved Elburz Mountains became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city sprawled below" (6). The living room becomes a sacred place like a sanctuary. It is a universe of one's own, with definite borderlines of private space. Despite this fact, the private space, like a female body has to be veiled. Nafisi writes, "[m]y mother would go crazy each time she saw [...] the curtainless windows, which I refused to dress until I was finally reminded that this was an Islamic country and windows needed to be dressed" (7).

Consequently, the veiled space intensifies the imaginary world. What is unseen enters the realm of imagination where reality mingles with fiction: "[t]hat censored view intensified my impression that the noise came not from the street below but from far-off place, a place whose persistent hum was our only link to the world we refused, for those few hours, to acknowledge" (8).

Nonetheless, the imposed veil is not efficient in separating the private and public space. Public sphere transgresses the private rooms and sanctuaries. The cacophony of the city life along with shouts and calls of the patients and their families from the neighboring hospital is always heard. People cross private borders: children ring the house doorbell and run away. Also, on one occasion, men from the Revolutionary Committee enter the narrator's building in order to climb the neighbor's wall and raid the neighbor's place.

On the other hand, the private space repeatedly transgresses its frontiers and enters the public vicinity. Nafisi, narrating this, observes: "Now that I look at those times, I see how many of [my students'] most private stories, their confidences, were told in public places: in my office, in coffee shops, in taxis and walking through the winding streets near my home" (296).

Both public and private spaces are violated by each other, and by the domestic as well as foreign military forces. The private buildings are raided by domestic state militia. The city, on the other hand, is raided by bombs and missiles. Like the private living room, the city is also described and embodied as a veiled female body that is undressed by the missile attacks. Nafisi describes the missile attacks during the last days of war between Iran and Iraq: “Tehran became a ghost town. To me, the city had suddenly gained a new pathos, as if, under the attacks and the desertions, it had shed its vulgar veil to reveal a decent, humane face. Tehran looked the way most of its remaining citizens must have felt: sad, forlorn and defenseless, yet not without a certain dignity” (208).

The mingling of the public and private space is intensified, as chaos becomes a ubiquitous reality in the city. The darkest atmosphere of destruction, grief, and mourning is intertwined with joys of occasional freedom from chaos. Nafisi recounts, “[a]t a time when Tehran was in deepest mourning, it was able to put on its gayest face. Women, in growing numbers, shunned the prescribed dark colors to put on their brightest scarves; many wore makeup, and their nylon stockings became more visible under their robes [...] empty streets of Tehran became livelier and more colorful” (234).

More than anything else, *Reading Lolita* is a book about confiscating, usurping, and in general, colonizing the body. Nafisi describes a situation where the individual female body does not belong to the person anymore, but to the state, religion, and other ruling systems of the society. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, new rules of veiling and covering were imposed upon the female body. Women were obliged to cover their whole body except their faces and hands. Furthermore, the uncovered parts had to be free of any additional ornaments such as facial makeup or nail colors. Rules were stricter in public places such as university campuses and public sector buildings. Nafisi describes how, for instance, the entrance gate of the university turned to become a place for searching female bodies: “Next to the gate there was a small opening with a curtain hanging from it. It was an aberration that attracted attention, because it did not belong there: it gaped with the arrogant authority of an intruder. Through this opening all the female students, including, my girls, went into a small dark room to be inspected” (29).

The small inspection functions as a surveillance room of the authorities who search bodies and personal items of female students before allowing them to enter the

university campus: “One day Sanaz had barged into class near the end of the session, crying. In between bursts of tears, she explained that she was late because the female guards at the door, finding a blush in her bag, had tried to send her home with a reprimand” (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 9). But these body surveillance rooms and checkpoints are not restricted to students and universities and could be found anywhere. Nafisi herself also experiences this on a shocking occasion:

The beginning of this game I can trace back quite specifically to the day I went to the Ministry of Higher Education with a friend who wanted to have her diploma validated. They searched us from head to foot and of the many sexual molestations I have had to suffer in my life, this was among the worst. The female guard told me to hold my hands up, up and up, she said, as she started to search me meticulously, going over every part of my body. She objected to the fact that I seemed to be wearing almost nothing under the robe. I explained to her that what I wore under my robe was none of her business. She took a tissue and told me to rub my cheeks, and since she did not achieve the desired results, because I had not worn any makeup, as I had told her, she rubbed it even harder, until I thought she might be trying to rub my skin off. (168)

Bodies belong to the authorities even during times of extreme chaos, and even when they are not alive anymore. Nafisi recalls how the authorities are obsessed with the possible threats of bodies uncovered: “Rafsanjani recommended that women dress properly when sleeping, so that if their houses were hit, they would not be ‘indecently exposed to strangers’ eyes”⁶ (160). Corpses could be dangerous as well. Nafisi recalls an incident when she tries to reach to her mentor and finds out that he had been busy the whole day searching for a place to bury a corpse, belonging to Baha’is minority group: “There were no burial places for Baha’is; the regime had destroyed the Baha’i cemetery in the first years of the revolution, demolishing the graves with a bulldozer” (230). Nafisi narrating the grotesque incident writes how her mentor and the kid who had lost his grandmother strived to find a burial place for her corpse: “[The mentor and the kid] drove to the back of the hospital, and there, the corpse, already wrapped in a white shroud, was given to them. They each took hold of one end and put the corpse in the trunk of the car. They then proceeded to drive to a garden he had heard of outside Tehran for the burial. They worried they might be stopped—what would they tell the militia? ” (230-231).

⁶ Rafsanjani was Iran’s president between 1989 and 1997

The censoring authorities that monitor bodies and set rules of body surveillance often ignore the difficulties these rules would cause for the subordinates. Also these rules are usually set ideologically and should be followed in a totalitarian manner in the society. Ironically enough, the chief film censor in the book is described as literally blind (24), and this blind attribute is demonstrated throughout the memoir whenever Nafisi discusses censorship and body surveillance in Iran: “Our world under the mullahs’ rule was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor” (25). Or here: “[H]ow well could one teach when the main concern of university officials was not the quality of one’s work but the color of one’s lips, the subversive potential of a single strand of hair?” (11)

The sense of having a body that is obliged to obey rules of authority is best described by Nafisi in the following passage, where the narrator shares her thought with her husband:

Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe, I said to Bijan [...] Well, it’s like this: if you’re forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body. That’s what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else—we either plan it or dream it. (329)

Ironically, throughout the memoir the colonization of the body by the colonizer is seen essential and even necessary for the colonized subject. The colonizer needs the colonized for his/her own benefit. Likewise, the colonized cannot survive without the colonizer. The analogue of two opposite poles completing each other comes from Nafisi’s reading of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, in which the jailer dances with the prisoner and the prisoner is therefore complicit of the crime (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 76). The opposite sides of the dichotomies need each other in order to function well. Nafisi reads *Lolita* under this light: “Lolita’s image is forever associated in the minds of her readers with that of her jailer. Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars” (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 37). The same reading is applied to the covered bodies and the uncovered ones, when Nafisi discusses the two pictures of her girls:

The two photographs should be placed side by side. Both embody the “fragile unreality”—to quote Nabokov on his own state of exile—of our existence in the Islamic Republic of Iran. One cancels the other, and yet without one, the other is

incomplete. In the first photograph, standing there in our black robes and scarves, we are as we had been shaped by someone else's dreams. In the second, we appear as we imagined ourselves. In neither could we feel completely at home. (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 24)

Nevertheless, there are ways out of this evil circle of dancing with the jailer, of abetting crimes of the colonizer in *Reading Lolita*, as Nafisi suggests. One solution is to use every opportunity to undermine the rules of authority: “[L]ike Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearance, growing our nails, falling in love and listening to forbidden music” (25-26).

Furthermore, the major solution that *Reading Lolita* suggests is escaping from fact into fiction, from reality into imagination. As one of the girls describes, the reading group is like a few hours sunshine in the dark reality of the girls' lives: “It allowed us to defy the repressive reality outside the room—not only that, but to avenge ourselves on those who controlled our lives” (57). Literature, in general, is liberating for women of *Reading Lolita*. Nafisi writes, “[m]y father used to say: our true home, our true history, was in our poetry” (172), and like her father, Nafisi takes refuge in reading books and engaging with literature, especially at times when outside reality becomes unbearably violent and brutal: “The only way I could give rhyme or rhythm to my life was to read my books” (97).

The rescuer imagination helps the narrator of *Reading Lolita* to invent and play “survival games.” One such is the game of corporeal invisibility, as Nafisi narrates:

This new feeling of unreality led me to invent new games, survival games I would now call them. My constant obsession with the veil had made me buy a very wide black robe that covered me down to my ankles, with kimonolike sleeves, wide and long. I had gotten into the habit of withdrawing my hands into the sleeves and pretending that I had no hands. Gradually, I pretended that when I wore the robe, my whole body disappeared: my arms, breasts, stomach and legs melted and disappeared and what was left was a piece of cloth the shape of my body that moved here and there, guided by some invisible force. (167-168)

The survival game of magical robe of invisibility —as I would call it— is a game of eliminating one's body and physicality through imagination. A body that cannot be

owned and possessed is better to be invisible from others' sight. Nafisi comes upon this idea the day that the authorities inspect her body, and force her to remove the nonexistent makeup on her cheeks. She narrates the moment when she came upon the idea of the invisibility game:

My face was burning and I felt dirty—I felt like my whole body was a solid, sweaty T-shirt that had to be cast off. That was when the idea of this game came to me: I decided to make my body invisible. The woman's coarse hands were reverse X rays that left only the surface intact and made the inside invisible. By the time she had finished inspecting me, I had become as light as the wind, a fleshless, boneless being. The trick to this magic act was that in order to remain invisible, I had to refrain from coming into contact with hard surfaces, especially with human beings: my invisibility was in direct ratio to the degree to which I could make other people not notice me. Then of course, from time to time I would make part of me return, like when I wished to defy an obstructionist figure of authority and I would leave a few strands of hair out and make my eyes reappear, to stare at them uncomfortably.

Sometimes, almost unconsciously, I would withdraw my hands into my wide sleeves and start touching my legs or my stomach. Do they exist? This stomach, this leg, these hands? Unfortunately, the Revolutionary Guards and the guardians of our morality did not see the world with the same eyes as me. They saw hands, faces and pink lipstick; they saw strands of hair and unruly socks where I saw some ethereal being drifting soundlessly down the street. (168)

By imagining that her body is invisible and then making it visible again in specific moments, Nafisi turns the body surveillance into a playful act. By playing this game, she chooses to be active instead of suffering and merely passively being searched. Although she cannot literally resist the physical surveillance, she does not remain inactive. By imagining to be invisible she liberates herself from the power of the authorities. The surveillance then becomes a liberating, playful, and empowering game.

Additionally, *Reading Lolita* is the story of reading, interpreting, and playing active roles in a process of enlightenment. By recounting and retelling the stories, one creates her own world of imagination and reality. Therefore, like Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*, one can liberate herself, and not only herself but other women as well. As Nafisi admits, “[i]t was as if the sheer act of recounting these stories gave us some control over them,” (30) recounting the stories becomes another way of empowering the self.

Despite striving so hard to decolonize the body and regain its rights, *Reading Lolita* fails to create a consistent discourse in reclaiming individuality. In the following, some of the deficiencies and inconsistencies of Nafisi's discourse will be discussed. First, Nafisi tries to figuratively incarnate characters of her memoir in the narrative—especially the girls—in order to give them individual forms like a sculpture that carves figures from raw material, and help the characters to reclaim their individuality by giving them their unique shape. Nonetheless, the attempt is hardly successful, as most of Nafisi's female characters remain almost abstract and similar to each other. Whitlock also mentions this point while discussing *Reading Lolita* as an “accented memoir” (179). She notes how girls in *Reading Lolita* remain collective. Giving examples, she observes how up to the final part of the book the voices of Mashid, Manna, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, Nassrin, and Sanaz do not resonate in the memoir. *Reading Lolita*, as Whitlock states, resonates with what the narrator and her girls begin their reading group with, namely, *A Thousand and One Nights*. This book is the first book they read before the reading group proceeds into Western literature. Like Scheherazade, Nafisi narrates stories and “the girls remain in her shadow” (Whitlock 180).

Second, the kind of individuality that Nafisi is eagerly seeking through decolonizing the body results in isolation, aloofness, and eventually hatred of the masses: “The more we withdrew into our sanctuary, the more we became alienated from our day-to-day life. When I walked down the streets, I asked myself, Are these my people, is this my hometown, am I who I am ?” (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 74) The isolation Nafisi mentions is now far from the state of mere individuality. The memoirist becomes unfamiliar with the formation, and characteristics of the masses. She covers and separates herself from the public, withdraws herself into the misanthropic world of selfhood and egotism.

The narrator of *Reading Lolita* discloses how during the seventies when she was in her youth, the revolutionary mood, the mood of believing in the power of people to change and overthrow tradition was the prevailing mood among Iranians as well as Westerners. Despite this, she writes how she enjoyed reading “counterrevolutionary” (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 85) authors during those days. She notes how paradoxical her personal choices are when she encounters the masses and how she favors her individual preferences over the collective ideals of the masses: “I had met Bijan Naderi [...] the leader of the group I most sympathized with. I fell in love with him for all the wrong reasons: not because of his revolutionary rhetoric but because he possessed a sense of

confidence in himself and his beliefs that went beyond *the hysterics of the movement*” (86) [emphasis added].

Public gatherings of any kind, whether it is related to the patients of a neighboring hospital or the masses on a street demonstration, are denounced by the author of *Reading Lolita*. One such example is the public mourning of Ayatollah Taleghani. Nafisi’s obsession with body and embodiment does not free her from dehumanizing and demoralizing the people she sees on the street who have come to participate at the funeral. She reports:

That was the first time I experienced the desperate, orgiastic pleasure of this form of public mourning: it was the one place where people mingled and touched bodies and shared emotions without restraint or guilt. There was a wild, sexually flavored frenzy in the air. Later, when I saw a slogan by Khomeini saying that the Islamic Republic survives through its mourning ceremonies, I could testify to its truth [...] I stood in the middle of the whirlpool, struggling to find a familiar face. Always in these demonstrations I would lose sight of those who’d come with me. Now I had lost my husband, and for a while I kept looking for him. The crowd pushed towards me, Voices appeared to be echoing out of different loudspeakers. Posters of Taleghani had mushroomed everywhere: on the walls, on the doors and windows of the bookshops, even on trees. The wide street in front of the university contracted and expanded to accommodate our movements and for a long time I moved senselessly, swaying to the beat of the crowd. Then I found myself beating my fists against a tree and crying, crying, as if the person closest to me had died and I was now all alone in the whole wide world. (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita* 90-91)

Although Nafisi believes the central sin of the Islamic regime was “lack of empathy” (224), she herself fails to empathize with people and share their sufferings. Another incident as such is when she joins her girls who are ridiculing and making fun of a dead student who was killed at the war between Iran and Iraq: “They were making fun of the dead student and laughing. They joked that his death was a marriage made in heaven—didn’t he and his comrades say that their only beloved was God? This was an allusion to the last wills [sic] and testaments made by the martyrs of the war, which were given a great deal of publicity” (210). The girls continue mocking the dead student, as they believe martyrs of the imposed war “are all sexual perverts, the whole lot of them!” (210) and they reach their perverse goal of making love with their “beloved”, i.e. God. The over sexualized tone of such discussions suggests the narrator’s obsession with body and her failure in considering the soul and minds as well. Everything, even the

most praised act of bravery and sacrifice, namely sacrificing one's self to defend his/her country is reduced to a mere sexualized bodily act. Spirituality, if it ever existed, fades away and the self is presented in its very corporeal sense. Another similar occasion is when Khomeini dies and people come to the streets to participate at his funeral. Again, *Reading Lolita* suggests that for its narrator the mourning of people is no more than a sexual frenzy:

I also remember the swarms of mourners—it was reported that hundreds of thousands had started to pour into Tehran, a black-clad army waving black flags, the men tearing their shirts, beating their chests, the women in their black chadors wailing and moaning, their bodies writhing in ecstatic grief.

Now I remember the hoses: because of the heat and the size of the crowd, the fire department had brought out hoses, which they aimed at people, spraying them at intervals with water to cool them off, but the effect made the scene oddly sexual. As I re-enact it in my mind, I can hear the swish of water, each spray silhouetted against the sky. Every once in a while someone would faint and in the midst of that frenzy, with a shocking sense of order, as if it were all rehearsed, the mourners would lift the person over their heads and pass him along until he reached a point of safety. (244)

Even at times of joyful public gatherings, when the narrator of *Reading Lolita* intends to enjoy the public atmosphere, she nags and remains unsatisfied with her presence among people. The people who line up to see a movie seem like a “protest rally” to Nafisi (206). She reports: “There were intellectuals, office workers, housewives, some with their small children in tow, a young mullah standing uncomfortably to the side—the kind of mix of people you would never have found at any other gathering in Tehran” (206). On the previous page Nafisi and one of her students, Mr. Forsati, discuss how people welcome more the cultural products they understand less. Similarly, at another public event, what Nafisi narrates is full of resentment along with a tone of disdain. The event, which is a concert, is anticipated reluctantly by the narrator and her husband, Bijan. Nafisi writes, “[Bijan] preferred listening to good music in the comfort and privacy of our home to subjecting himself to these mediocre live performances with their long lines and inevitable harassment that ensued” (299). Nafisi's anticipation for a delightful musical night is not fulfilled. What she constantly expects from the Iranian musicians is the Western style of performing music, which obviously will not take place within an ideological Islamic country. When all her expectations turn to disappoint her, Nafisi decides to distance herself from the audience and public and retreat to herself:

“As I sat there in that packed house, I decided that the only way the night could possibly be turned into an entertainment was if I pretended to be an outside observer who had come not to have fun but to report on a night out in the Islamic Republic of Iran” (300).

Reading Lolita is a memoir of a person desperately in need of restoring and regaining her individuality. Nonetheless, throughout this claiming of one’s self (i.e. body and soul), gradually the gap between the individual and the collective is widened as Nafisi proceeds in her memoir. Over and over, dichotomies such as us/them are emphasized and highlighted. The border between the individual and the masses becomes more rigid and clear. Nafisi’s observations of the revolution and its aftermath events are always challenged by herself and others in this respect. For instance, on the occasion of overtaking the American embassy in Tehran when Nafisi joins the people who have gathered outside of the embassy, she faces one of her students in the crowd: “I recognize one of my leftist students, who sees me, smiles and comes towards me. Hello, Professor. I see you’ve joined us. Who is us? I ask him. The masses, the real people, he says quite seriously. But this is not your demonstration, I say. You’re wrong there” (105).

In another incident, the young student who sets fire to himself at the university will be categorized as one of “them”, since he belongs to the Muslim Students’ Association. Even his suicidal self-burning is not an excuse to Nafisi. She joins a group of her girls who have also witnessed the incident but instead of showing any sympathy they recall anecdotes of the injured students’ comrade’s sexual arousal. Nafisi confesses that she knows very little of the injured student’s life and background, and adds, “no one seemed to care” (251). Nevertheless, Nafisi consciously imposes a collective identity on the injured student: “I could not remember his name. He had turned himself into a revolutionary, a martyr and a war veteran, but not an *individual* [emphasis added]” (252). The narrator of *Reading Lolita* then concludes narrating this incident with an observation and understanding of the polarized society. She writes, “[r]esentment had erased all ambiguity in our encounters with people like him; we had been polarized into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (252).

These examples suggest how the memoirist of *Reading Lolita* portrays an autonomous self in her text, in contrast to what feminist scholars of Autobiography Studies suggest is a relational self. This is not always the case, and, as I will discuss in the third chapter

of this dissertation, a memoirist can reveal different selfhoods in her memoirs. Specifically, Nafisi constructs an autonomous self in her first memoir but portrays a relational self in her second memoir.

Third, constantly challenging the ideas of bodies, places, and identities covered, or uncovered, Nafisi hardly holds a consistent viewpoint towards facing various characters and situations in *Reading Lolita*. Veil can have different meanings throughout the book. Not only for Nafisi, but also for other characters and personalities in the memoir, veiling and unveiling convey various implications in pursuing personal or political goals. For a leftist professor in the History Department, the veil can be no more than a political act: fighting the “U.S imperialists” (97). For a Muslim student such as Mr. Bahri the veil is an homage to ideals of the Islamic Revolution, therefore unveiling can endanger the revolution and shake its pillars: “Mr. Bahri could not understand why we were making such a fuss over a piece of cloth. Did we not see that there were more important issues to think about, that the whole life of the revolution was at stake?” (165) For the narrator herself, the veil is a sign of surrendering to the power. She leaves her university teaching position because she does not want to be subjected to the imposed rules by authorities. Moreover, she does not want her student to consider her a conformist: “What did [Mr. Bahri] imagine our students would think of us if they saw us wearing the veil when we had sworn never to do so? Would they not say that we have sold out our beliefs for a few thousand tumans a month? What would you think Mr. Bahri?” (165)

But the veil can also be a “symbol of relationship with God” if the person who wears it is the narrator’s grandmother, for instance. Nafisi writes, “I told Mr. Bahri about my grandmother, a devout Muslim. She resented the fact that her veil, which to her was a symbol of her sacred relationship to God, had now become an instrument of power, turning the women who wore them into political signs and symbols” (103). Nafisi explains the difference between her grandmother’s beliefs with what she calls the political Islam. Again, for the narrator, a personal choice is valuable but a collective, political action that is imposed by the power and authorities on individuals should be protested and resisted.

However, Nafisi is not consistent in this latest claim. She believes that “[t]he unveiling of women mandated by Reza Shah in 1936 had been a controversial symbol of

modernization, a powerful sign of the reduction of the clergy's power" (112). If freedom of dress is appreciated, everyone has to have the right to choose whether to cover her body or not. Imposing the veil is no different than imposing the "unveiling." Both acts should be denounced by a person believing in individuality, and loathing totalitarianism.

Moreover, Nafisi does not accept the personal choice of dress for characters like Miss Hatef, and Miss Ruhi, who wear chador. Describing them she writes,

They are all negative attention. Every once in a while, from beneath their black chadors, which reveal no more than a sharp nose on one and a small, upturned one on the other, they whisper; sometimes they even smile.

There is something peculiar about the way they wear their chadors. I have noticed it in many other women, especially the younger ones. For there is in them, in their gestures and movements, none of the shy withdrawal of my grandmother, whose every gesture begged and commanded the beholder to ignore her, to bypass her and leave her alone. All through my childhood and early youth, my grandmother's chador had a special meaning to me. It was a shelter, a world apart from the rest of the world. I remember the way she wrapped her chador around her body and the way she walked around her yard when the pomegranates were in bloom. Now the chador was forever marred by the political significance it had gained. It had become cold and menacing, worn by women like Miss Hatef and Miss Ruhi with defiance. (192)

Miss Hatef and Miss Ruhi's wearing a veil is a defiant gesture because it lacks the passivity of the grandmother's wish to be ignored. However, Nafisi rejects this boldness in their character, preferring exactly what she ridiculed and mocked previously in the memoir. Although she makes fun of a slogan in the streets reading "A WOMAN IN A VEIL IS PROTECTED LIKE A PEARL IN AN OYSTER SHELL" (200), she prefers the kind of veil that is a shelter for the body; a veil that makes a woman invisible. But she is again inconsistent in this claim because at the same time she praises, for instance, Mahshid, one of her girls, who wanted to be veiled because veiling made her look different and proud: "[T]he revolution that imposed the scarf on others did not relieve Mahshid of her loneliness. Before the revolution, she could in a sense take pride in her isolation. At that time, she had worn the scarf as a testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless" (13).

To summarize, by focusing on *Reading Lolita* in this chapter, issues of body and embodiment in presenting the autobiographical self were discussed. Writing of body—and valuing corporeality—as relatively recent in the history of autobiography, is intertwined with many socio/political aspects of the autobiographer's life; hence it can be interpreted as a political deed. In *Reading Lolita*, issues of embodiment of the self and others play a substantial role. Obsessed with the transition between covering and uncovering the body, Nafisi fights over regaining the ownership right to the female body and thereby seeking individuality under an authoritative and patriarchal state.

To demonstrate how the embodiment is realized in *Reading Lolita*, the following topics were introduced and discussed in this chapter: the symbolic construction of ego in the Lacanian sense through the uneasy confrontation of the self and its image; craving color—an aspect of embodiment and physicality—as a call for individuality; the embodiment of place and space and the vain effort to separate the private space from the public one, as they constantly transgress and violate each other; the colonization of the female body by the ruling systems of the society through the veil, surveillance and censorship; and the decolonization of the body through literature and imagination as forms of resistance and liberation.

Moreover, the deficiencies of the discourse that *Reading Lolita* constructs for decolonizing the body are discussed in this chapter: Most of Nafisi's female characters remain almost abstract and identical; pursuing individuality is radicalized to seeking refuge in isolation, egotism and eventually hatred of the masses. Gradually the gap between the individual and the collective is widened as dichotomies such as us/them are emphasized in the memoir. Also, there is an inconsistency between what it means to have appropriate versus inappropriate control over one's body.

Chapter 3. The Relational Self in *Things I've been Silent About*

3.1. The Relational Self

This chapter introduces the relational self, another thematic of subjectivity suggested by Moore-Gilbert in postcolonial life-writings. By offering a historical overview on the dichotomy of relational/autonomous self, I will argue how this thematic of subjectivity was treated by scholars of canonical Western male autobiographies, by feminist researchers, and by postcolonial critics of the field. This chapter aims to answer questions about autonomy/relationality of selfhood in Azar Nafisi's second memoir. A detailed study of this relationality will be demonstrated, in which the relationship of the autobiographical self with her immediate and non-immediate "others" is analyzed.

Moore-Gilbert (17) suggests that postcolonial autobiographers are likely to present a relational autobiographical self in their works. In his exploration of this thematic of subjectivity, he explains how the relational self was a strange notion for critics of Autobiography Studies during the first and second phases. For instance, in the first phase what Misch underlines is the **autonomy** of the autobiographical "I" in life-writings. The autobiographer, in Misch's view, is above all an autonomous entity and to gain this autonomy s/he should stand not in relation to, but "against" others:

We live in possession of ourselves, after the special manner of a being conscious of itself and capable of saying 'I.' To stand as an I, or, more exactly, as an 'I'-saying person, over against the persons and living beings and the things around us implies that we are aware of our independent existence, we do not merely impart impulses and perform acts as things of elementary existence, but as living beings we have knowledge of our impulses and actions as our own. (Misch 9)

Reinforcing Misch's idea about the autonomy of the self, Gusdorf (78) argues that the existence of the genre autobiography is indebted to the fact that the individual is no longer enmeshed in community and has emerged as singular. This singularity of the individual is a recent achievement in human history, as Gusdorf writes: "Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with*

others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (78).

In 1970 Francis Hart, another critic in the second phase of Autobiography Studies, published his article, “Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography,” in which the same line of argumentation for the autonomy of the self is further corroborated. Criticizing Hart’s definitions of the autobiographical situation, Smith finds it problematic, especially when it comes to analyzing women’s life-writings: “Hart assumes a certain ideology of selfhood grounded in the metaphysical notion of the essential self, one that privileges individuality and separateness over connectedness. That conception of individuality may not motivate the most informed reading of women’s autobiographical texts” (Smith 12).

The third phase of Autobiography Studies still, as Moore-Gilbert (17) records, echoes similar attitudes towards the autonomy of the self. This characteristic of the subject is very present among male scholars of the genre when they study the canonical male autobiographers. Nonetheless, as Moore-Gilbert argues, even for the male life-writers no absolute autonomy of the subject is possible: “[T]he fact that autobiography is generally designed to be consumed by others inevitably implies some commitment to principles of relationality [...], however, in canonical autobiography ‘relationality’ is generally less concretely immediate in comparison with women’s writing [sic]” (139).

For most feminist critics in Autobiography Studies, women’s presentation of the self is, unlike men’s, relational. Brodzki and Schenck, for instance, assert that the most widespread feature of women’s autobiography is their defining of self “in relation to significant others” (8). This notion of relationality has roots in certain feminists’ analyses of gender and the role of men and women in public as well as domestic life.

For instance, in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Nancy Chodorow discusses the gender roles of women and men by using theoretical frameworks of psychoanalysis. She argues that throughout history women’s main role was mothering and it continues to be this way. The nuclear Western family, consisting of husband, wife, and children, had other extensions and responsibilities in pre-industrialized society. As Chodorow reports, “Capitalist industrialization removed grown children, grandparents, and nonfamily members from the household and sharply curtailed men’s participation in family life” (5).

Chodorow (4-5) claims that today's⁷ nuclear family, despite being circumscribed to man, woman, and children, continues to reproduce certain old roles for women and men. Mothering, in particular, has become a key function of women. The early capitalist era in the United States, for instance, promoted the ideology of "moral mothers" and expected women to play the nurturing mother figure for both their husbands, and their children. The "moral mothers" ideology was the outcome of women's now changed roles in domestic life after industrialization. The new technologies shifted the role of nuclear family from a workplace for all its members to a division of public/domestic labor. The household was no longer the "major productive unit of society" and the outside-the-home production became dominant. Hence, there was a decline in inside-the-home production. Chodorow further explains:

In addition to its diminished role in material production, the family lost much of its educational and religious role, as well as its role in the care of the sick and aged. The family became a quintessentially relational and personal institution, *the* personal sphere of society. Women's family role became centered on child care and taking care of men. This role involved more than physical labor. It was relational and personal and, in the case of both children and men, maternal. (4-5)

Although the "moral mothering" ideology is no longer prevalent in modern Western society, Chodorow notes that mothering continues to be as gendered as it used to be, and is being reproduced by itself cyclically: "The sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother and are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than men produces in daughters and sons a division of psychological capacities which leads them to reproduce this sexual and familial division of labor" (7).

In Chodorow's framework, mothering is, above all, a "relationship" between two parties. (61) She shows psychoanalytically how women develop and build this relationship with their daughters and through this the feminine personality is constructed primarily as relational. Men, on the other hand, build their identity on being separated from others because their early childhood is a period when they are nurtured by the opposite—and not their own—sex: their female mother (209).

⁷ N.B. Chodorow's book was published in 1978 and since then societies have developed significantly in terms of norms of gender roles.

Earlier on, the relationality of the feminine personality was assumed by many scholars as universal and, therefore, independent of social, cultural, and geographical contexts. However, as stated by Suad Joseph in her book *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, And Identity*, some feminists challenged the universality and essentiality of these theories, as they found flaws in the methodology of Chodorow and the reductionist perspective in which she formulates her theory (Joseph 7).

Joseph (8-9) discusses how psychoanalytical theory, on which Chodorow constructs her ideas, is grounded on “Western philosophical axioms” that flows from “Cartesian dualistic assumptions” such as self/object split, or self-representation/object-representation. Scholars have questioned the gender dualism in psychoanalysis, as well as other binaries on which such theories tend to elaborate their ideas. They argue that these binaries are constructed contextually. Race, ethnicity, and class, along with many other cultural dimensions can change the pre-assumed dualism in earlier feminist ideas. Therefore, gendered selfhood can vary from culture to culture, and from individual to individual. Hence, there are many varieties of selfhood across cultures that need to be taken into account.

Moore-Gilbert recalls that this variation of selfhood is, for instance, present in autobiographies of minority women in Western society, or in life-writings of post-colonial women. The selfhood presented in these divisions of women’s autobiographical works can be demonstrated differently than those by white Western women. These selfhoods, at once, can be individual and collective, or absolutely collective, or significantly inclining to individuation and autonomy. The relationality may not be embraced by women autobiographers in the postcolonial context: “Among some (post)colonial societies [...] women may be marginalised and anonymised by an indigenous patriarchy to an extent that a fiercely individualistic conception of autonomous Selfhood becomes—strategically and temporarily at least—legitimate, even necessary” (Moore Gilbert 18-19).

In the following sections, the relational selfhood presented in Azar Nafisi’s second memoir, *Things I’ve Been Silent About* will be analyzed in detail.

3.2. Relational Self in Autobiographies of Iranian Women in Diaspora: the Case of *Things I've Been Silent About*

Previously, in the second chapter, I explored the embodied self that Nafisi attempts to illustrate in *Reading Lolita*, her first memoir. Five years after *Reading Lolita*, she published a second memoir in order to satisfy an urge that is best summarized in the memoir's title: *Things I've Been Silent About*. The idea to talk about what was absent in the first memoir motivated Nafisi to write a sequence: a book that presents a relational autobiographical selfhood in its own way. In *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi portrays herself as an Iranian woman seeking individuality in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, whereas in *Things*, she portrays herself relational rather than monadic, building particular relationships with her immediate- and non-immediate "others".

In the prologue to *Things*, Nafisi enumerates different forms of silence, in particular, silence she wants to break by writing her second memoir. She writes, "this book is a response to my inner censor and inquisitor" (Nafisi, *Things* xxi). The self-imposed silence and self-censorship of Nafisi in *Reading Lolita* is not a political censorship of an authoritative state, because she has already overcome such censorship by publishing the book outside of the country. However, it is a response to self-censorship that prevented her from writing about her mother, father, and others close to her. In other words, It is a response to **the censored relational self**. Silence in the past is a motive to speak in the present. Now that her parents are deceased, she feels the need to speak about them, to "feel the gaps—the silences," to search for the truth in order to "fill in the void created by their deaths" (xxi).

3.2.1. The Relationship Between Self and Mother

Nafisi, the relational autobiographical subject in *Things*, starts the memoir's narration by talking about her mother, who constructs a portrait of herself by narrating her past: "[T]here was something touching in the way [my mother] talked about herself and her past as if she too were an invention, occupying the body of another woman who teasingly appeared to us in glimmers, like a firefly" (xviii). Since Mother's portrait of

her past is so much different from what she is in the present, her narration creates a sense of unreality and increases doubt that her story about her past is reliable.

Searching for truth, or better said, for the “true” version of Mother, becomes one of the main concerns of the memoirist in *Things*. The mother that she knows had a short married life before she married Nafisi’s father; a life that she claims to have been a happy one, when she had still danced with her husband—something she refuses to do for some reason. Mother’s unhappiness preoccupies Nafisi’s mind most of the time. She recounts:

All through my childhood and youth, and even now in this city so far from the Tehran that I remember, the shadow of that other ghostly woman who danced and smiled and loved disturbs the memories of the one I knew as my mother. I have a feeling that if somehow I could understand just when she stopped dancing—when she stopped wanting to dance—I would find the key to my mother’s riddle and finally make my peace with her. (4-5)

This search for the truth, however, is ultimately unsatisfactory: “[Mother] was too proud and too stubborn to have much interest in the truth. And so she transformed a real place and history into a fantasy of her own creation” (Nafisi, *Things* 9). Mother resists telling the truth by lying (e.g. about her date of birth (6)) or avoiding the necessary details. She does not fully answer questions. Every quest for accuracy is rejected, as Nafisi writes: “She was too immersed in her own inner world to be bothered by such details. No matter what I asked her, she would tell me the same stock stories, which I knew almost by heart ” (5). The more the memoirist asks questions, the less she finds out about these details that would have filled in the gaps. The memoirist finds “[n]o dates, no concrete facts, nothing that went outside [her] mother’s set script” (6).

Nevertheless, the mother and daughter both search for the truth. It is not only the daughter who wants to know the truth; the mother also wants to know the truth. She interrogates her daughter in order to find out about her own husband’s betrayals, his affairs with other women (24). She does things like reading her daughter’s diaries and listening to her phone calls (63).

Mother’s portrayal in the memoir is very much tied with the act of telling or hiding the truth. Not only does she avert the truth, but the truth averts her. For instance, we read the first man to whom she was married had a terminal illness. This fact was kept hidden

from her by the groom's family, a fact that could have changed her mother's life dramatically (*Things* 9). Her mother's second marriage also starts with a lie about her father having agreed to the marriage (48). Also, when her second husband, Nafisi's father, cheats on her to have affairs with other women, everyone in the family tries to keep the secret and not reveal anything to her. Finally, in the end, when she is at her deathbed, others lie to her that the regime has changed and that her daughter will soon return to the country (307).

After all, one cannot be sure of the truth about the mother, as in every autobiography, there is a question of fact, fiction, or a blend of both, as in *Things*. The narrator's honest confessions about the lies she has told her parents warns the readers not to take her own word as speaking the objective facts. What is created is subjective, a mix of memory, facts, and imagination. The relationship between the narrator and her mother, however, is more complicated than being merely described as untrustworthy. Nafisi depicts a life-long relationship with her mother, one that changes over the years, and develops in various ways, relatively maturing at the end.

The first phase of this relationship is resistance, as Nafisi's mother calls it. Nafisi writes: "Mother often said that I resisted her from the moment I was born" (*Things* 11). Early years of the narrator's life are full of stories about her problematic relationship with her mother. From throwing up grape juice her mother gives her (11), to her toys being locked up in a closet by Mother (11), to the frequent daily fights over trivial things such as eating pear (111), the location of a bed (12), going to friends' places (106), what is depicted is a relationship full of resentment and bitterness; a relationship that is destructive and at times goes to the extreme. Nafisi recounts: "Over the years I will lose or destroy objects that are dearest to me, especially those given to me by my mother. Rings and earrings, antique lamps, figurines—I can see them all clearly" (12). On occasion the frustrating relationship becomes devastating and/or suicidal. The following bantering dialogue that the memoirist has with her brother over her relationship with Mother best explains this devastation:

That night we hatch several plans: we could drug her by dropping Valium into her coffee, invite the doctor to come for a social visit and have him diagnose her on the sly. He could hypnotize her.... Poison, what about poison? I say. You want to kill her? No, we give her a little poison and then rescue her; that way she will appreciate life. Ah, she will say. I never knew how precious life was. Or

what if the three of us, Father, you, and I, committed suicide. That would teach her a lesson, I say excitedly. Yes, that might be the best solution. (114)

The resentment of not being approved of, yet craving to be approved of by the other one is another characteristic of the memoirist's relationship with her mother in *Things*. Nafisi writes how she craved her mother's approval that was never given to her, and how much she wanted to be loved by her mother, to the extent that she even attempted suicide in order to capture her mother's attention (23). On the other hand, Mother also anticipates her daughter taking her as her life role model, and when she finds out she has chosen a fictional heroin in Persian literature instead, she decides to show her resentment and displeasure: "That night, when I tried to kiss her good night, my mother turned away, saying, 'Go and kiss your imaginary role model, Rudabeh'" (75).

The second phase of the narrator's relationship with her mother covers the years of her coming of age and gradually gaining independence. Nafisi recalls how her mother searched for a good school in Britain to send her to (*Things* 70), and how her mother, accompanying her on the first three months of her stay in Britain, opened up a new experience in the mother-daughter relationship:

I'm not sure what would have happened if I had not spent those three months in Lancaster with my mother. I did not realize it then, but the experience would remain with me, opening up a new feeling, a soft spot, if you will, that would later on shape my whole assessment of her. It was like a tiny rivulet, promising a large and bountiful river whose potential, once revealed, could never be forgotten. (86)

The second phase of the mother-daughter relationship in *Things* is a nurturing phase, in which the mother teaches her daughter the strength she needs to overcome life's difficulties and obstacles. On the plane leaving Iran to start school in England, Nafisi recalls what Mother reminds her about, the privileges of her life compared to the mother's deprivation in her childhood: "I was lucky, [Mother] said, I had parents who cared for me, who loved me enough to accept this separation, but she had never had the joy and comfort of having a mother. 'I want for you what I never had,' she said" (83). The mother, being deprived of a warm and happy family life in her childhood, advises her daughter to overcome difficulties by seeing them as trivial and therefore endurable.

Furthermore, during her stay in Lancaster, the mother helps her daughter to adapt to the new lifestyle, which is different in every aspect from the lifestyle of a schoolgirl in Iran

who lives with her parents. Living now in a foreign country, learning a foreign language, and studying in a school as the only foreign child are the new challenges that the adolescent Azi has to deal with. The mother helps her daughter to mitigate the difficulty she is facing, for instance, in learning English language. Nafisi writes: “At night I left her a list of English words and by the next day she would have their meanings, which she looked up in the dictionary, ready for me at my desk. She helped me memorize words for one or two hours after dinner. In later years, she would bitterly remind me that if it weren’t for her I would never have learned English. And it was probably true” (89).

The mother’s effort to build a “model family,” as Nafisi remarks, is “her main ambition” throughout her life. Facing deprivation in her childhood, the mother now strives to provide for her family that which she was deprived in her own life. However, this well-intended aim has adverse results. The “unexpected acts of kindness” become destructive and the attempt at perfection turns into imperfection and cruelty. Nafisi describes how this complex set of cruel kindnesses turns the mother-daughter relationship into an ill-trapped one: “[W]e felt trapped because, although [my mother] ruled our lives, she was also terribly vulnerable, and although she hated me at times, she also sacrificed so much for me. She wanted me to be beautiful, polished, sophisticated, intelligent, an obedient daughter, a successful and educated career woman. I was perhaps her greatest disappointment” (90). Or here: “She paid me all the attention that had been denied her. The irony is that, in order to become what she wanted me to be, I had to distance myself from her. I could not be her puppet. She never realized when I later learned to fend for myself how much she had accomplished” (93).

However, as mentioned before, the mother-daughter relationship in *Things* is not static, but it changes and develops over time. While the narrator distances herself from the mother in the early years, there are also moments of revelation in their relationship when Mothers’ stories affect her in a positive way. On occasion, for instance, Nafisi confesses that it was only the mother’s anecdotes of her life that encouraged the memoirist to continue her education in difficult situations (93). The daughter’s resistance to her mother is no longer the behavioral motive. Instead, she is now willing to pursue her mother’s unfulfilled ambition: “I wanted to become the woman she claimed she wanted to be” (93).

The third and final phase in the mother-daughter relationship in *Things* starts after the divorce of Nafisi's parents. Unlike the previous phases, Mother no longer possesses the power she used to have in the relationship with her children. Now being a lonely, single, and aged woman, Mother is the one who is dependent on her children (286). The fragility of the aged mother is pictured towards the end of the memoir, when the daughter and her family spend their last days in Iran before their departure to the U.S. Now the mother is a precious, fragile entity from the daughter's soon-to-be-past life. Feeling nostalgic, now the daughter wants to spend as much time with her mother as possible. She tries hard "to drag stories from her" (296). She eagerly wants to preserve and freeze the moments she spends with her mother. Frequently she takes pictures of her mother, and talks to her. At times, Mother also shows great interest in deeds of her daughter. For instance, on an occasion she gives her daughter a file of Nafisi's articles that she had collected over the years. These are the moments of sensational revelation in the memoir as it shows aspects of the mother-daughter relationship that were kept hidden from the eyes of the memoirist and, therefore, the readers.

Things is not a portrayal of only one, but several relational selves. Not only the memoirist's selfhood and characteristic is described via her relationships with others, but others are also depicted through their relationships. The mother's picture, for example, is complete when, her daughter aside, she is illustrated in the memoir in relation to her husband, her friends, her parents, and others. These relationships are also inter-related and affect each other. The mother's relationship with her first husband demarcates her relationship with her second one, as Nafisi writes, "[h]er bitterness about the past faded into a more general dissatisfaction with the present" (86).

Furthermore, the mother's socially ambitious characteristic and her public relations are displayed in *Things*, for instance, through rites and ceremonies or actively meddling in her husband's municipal works. In her coffee morning sessions, for example, we read about Mother's serving coffee to a wide-ranging group of visitors such as journalists, society types, taxi drivers, her hairdresser, and others. Also when her husband becomes mayor, the mother actively meddles in a newly gained position of her husband: "Mother had her own set of spies with whose help she managed to meddle in the affairs of a city that, in many ways, she knew more intimately than my father did" (104).

Additionally, the mother's relationship with the father is defined and affected by the public face she eagerly maintains and practices. The memoirist describes this as rivalry with the father. But it suggests more than that: a rivalry not just with one man, but with men in general, since from her childhood the mother eagerly wished to be a man. Nafisi calls her mother's wish "Alice James's syndrome," as the mother occasionally yearns: "If only I were a man!" (Nafisi, *Things* 39) The mother, who had so many obstacles during her lifetime, runs for Parliamentary election and wins it. Ultimately, her wish to become a public figure is fulfilled. Nafisi comments, "[s]he used to say that while fate had prevented her from becoming a doctor, now at least she had a chance to show her true mettle" (152). The moment of the mother's triumph, however, is "eclipsed" by her husband's imprisonment, as Nafisi notes. Time and again, the father also complains about this rivalry, as Nafisi explains: "In his memoir Father explains that his opposition was based on my mother's lack of political experience and her unpredictable temper" (124).

Mother's politics, despite becoming less active after the Islamic Revolution, never fades away entirely. Nafisi recalls how her mother becomes interested in her activity during the time Nafisi teaches at university. She remembers how her mother continues her interest in politics and being politically active in her own way. For instance, every time Nafisi wants to leave Iran for conferences, her mother reminds her to tell "them" about the crimes of the regime. Nafisi recalls:

Sometimes she invited me for coffee and commanded me to listen carefully to what friend or a perfect stranger had to say about the goings-on in the country. The first time she said tell them, I said. 'Tell who, Mom?' 'Those who invited you, [...] I can still picture Mother early in the morning, standing by the garage door, ready to perform the parting rituals, holding a tray on which she had placed a copy of the Koran and a small bowl of water with a single flower floating in it. Before sprinkling the water after me for good luck and safe journey, she takes a semi-crumpled piece of white paper out of her dressing gown pocket and hands it out to me. 'I have written down a list of names of the people who are in jail or were killed. Give it to your friends. Make sure you do,' she says, almost pleading. (Nafisi, *Things* 279-80)

3.2.2. The Relationship between Self and Father

Unlike the mother-daughter relationship in *Things*, the relationship that the memoirist builds with her father is less hierarchical. In several occasions she mentions having some kind of equal ranking in the family with the father, when it comes to placing the self in relation to the mother. Both the father and daughter are seeking the mother's approval, both are looking for the warmth and happiness in the family, and both are unsatisfied with the mother's tyrannical behavior. Consequently, when the father cheats on the mother, the daughter becomes his most faithful ally and accomplice. Nafisi writes, "I became [my father's] most trusted accomplice, our friendship cemented by the mutual misery we suffered at my mother's hands" (25). This friendship is further explained here: "I collected [my father's] poems, listened to his woes, and helped him choose appropriate gifts, first for my mother and then for the women he fell in love with" (xv).

The friendly father-daughter relationship flourishes and develops through literature. For instance, to soothe her daughter in an early incident of a dispute between mother and daughter over the location of a bed, Father suggests that she use her imagination in order to make stories and escape from the dreadful reality into the world of fantasy and literature, a world in which Mother has no control over her: "In this secret world my mother had no role. This is how we took our revenge on her tyrannies" (4).

Describing the literary interests and achievements of her father, Nafisi mentions the publishing of three children's books based on classical Persian literature by him. One of these books is a version of *Shahnameh* (or *The Book of Kings*)—the long versed epic by Ferdowsi, the famous Iranian poet of the 10th century, in which he narrates the Iranian historical past intertwined with mythology. Nafisi reports how this literary connection between Father and his children is also acknowledged in the introduction to this book. Talking about Ferdowsi, Nafisi recalls how her father venerated the poet and his works, and through this he transferred a sense of nationalism and patriotism to his children: "[My father] taught us that poets demand a special kind of respect, different from the respect we owe our teachers or our elders [...]. My first notion of Iran was formed by my father's tales from the *Shahnameh*" (14).

In fact, storytelling plays significant roles in relationships of the memoirist's family in *Things*. It is not only between father and daughter, but also among other members of the family that stories are told, retold, and changed through various points of view. The same narration of an incident told by Mother could be changed when recounted by Father:

All our lives my brother and I were caught by the fictions my parents told us—fictions about themselves as well as others. Each wanted us to judge the other in his or her favor. Sometimes I felt cheated, as if they never allowed us to have a story of our own. It is only now that I understand how much their story was also mine. (xvii)

Nevertheless, the family habit of narrating stories, practiced in particular by parents, is performed through different mediums: while the mother is more of an oral storyteller, the father communicates more with the written word, a habit common in both Father and later in her memoirist daughter: “As a family we were fond of telling stories. My father left behind a published memoir and a far more interesting unpublished one, and over fifteen hundred pages of diaries. Mother did not write but she told us stories from her past” (xv).

The father's written voice becomes a second direct narrating point of view in *Things*. Some parts of the father's memoir are embedded in the text of the daughter's memoir. The daughter reconstructs her father partly through his own written word, and partly through the commentary, annotation, and interpretation of his autobiographical text. The father's diary, addressed to the daughter, becomes a source of information and inspiration for the *Things'* memoirist, though at the beginning she ignores this autobiographical achievement: “I so regret not having paid more attention to my father's memoirs when he was alive. He gave me an early draft after the revolution. At the time I mainly ignored it, feeling a slight condescension toward his literary efforts” (43).

Being a literary critic, Nafisi later uses her father's diary and analyzes it textually in order to find out more about his characteristics and personality. Giving an example, Nafisi analyzes the literary characteristic of the diary at the time when his father was Tehran's mayor: “Father's diaries abound with breathless descriptions of the plans he set in motion for the city of Tehran [...]. The text brims with activity: the verbs are

positive and the prose energetic and concrete. This is how I remember him in those days” (101).

Later, the father’s diary becomes a valuable document of the days and moments of which the daughter herself was not a witness. Years of the father’s imprisonment are one of them. The solitary moments in prison are now shared with the daughter: “Five volumes and almost fifteen hundred pages remain of my father’s diaries, recording his life in jail until his release and ultimate exoneration four years later” (142). His daily routine and activities in jail, report of family visits and comments on his own life, his relationships with his wife and children and records of feelings, conversations with the prison staff, friends and visitors, poetry addressed to family members, and political commentaries on domestic as well as foreign politics are among the subjects of the father’s diary.

The father’s articulation through stories is also compared with the mother’s. While Mother is an orator, Father is a writer. Father’s narrative is straightforward and is accompanied by commentaries, while Mother’s is nonlinear, fragmentary and sometimes puzzling: “Unlike Father, who told us long stories about himself and always analyzed them, my mother constructed her stories in such a way that they had no beginning or end. They were usually composed of a single event, a momentous occasion offered as a puzzle, insinuating all manner of significance” (85).

3.2.3. The Relationship between Self and Nation

While the memoirist of *Reading Lolita* has changed her autobiographical relationship with her immediate “others” in *Things*, she has also improved her relational self in expressing the self as related to non-immediate others, specifically with the nation and its history. While the focal point of *Reading Lolita* is the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, *Things*’ focus is mainly a coverage of historical and political ups and downs of the country before the Islamic Revolution, in the Pahlavi period and slightly after. However, politics in *Things* does not override the personal but it provides the personal with an intertwined background in which Nafisi places it, thus enriching the family history. She declares, “I do not mean this book to be a political or social

commentary, or a useful life story. I want to tell the story of a family that unfolds against the backdrop of a turbulent era in Iran's political and cultural history" (xviii). Further she asserts: "In this book my interest is not in general recitation of historical times but rather in those fragile intersections—the places where moments in an individual's private life and personality resonate with and reflect a larger, more universal story" (xx).

How one defines the self in regard to being Iranian is one of the identity concerns in *Things*. Nafisi describes how her immediate and non-immediate "others" define being Iranian, and whether nationalism appears significant or trivial to them. In this respect, the mother, for instance, holds different views than the father:

For my mother there was no other country. She sometimes spoke of other places to which she had traveled. She admires them, but Iran was her home. Whereas my father constantly wrangled and struggled with what it meant to be an Iranian, Mother had no such problems. Certain things were immutable for her. Being Iranian seemed to come with her genes—like her beautiful dark eyes, so dark that they appeared black, or the light olive color of her skin. She criticized Iranians the same way she disapproved of certain members of her clan, but she never related what she perceived as their shortcomings to Iran. (15)

More patriotic perspectives originate from Father in *Things*. Father's preoccupation with Persian mythology and literature motivates the nationalist emergence of his identity and her daughter's: "For Father, Ferdowsi was the key to the past. The *Shahnameh* was the only evidence of that magnificent Persian Empire that haunted our dreams and nightmares" (241). Nafisi explains how this mythological narrative of Iran had established for her an illusionary homeland that did not exist outside imagination: "Ferdowsi's Iran was the magnificent paradise I came to believe in as a child. It was an endless green pasture, populated with heroes and queens. I was for some time under the illusion that my country was as splendid as the edifice its classical poets had built out of words" (21). Further she continues, "My role models as I grew up were the imaginary women of my father's stories—not the passive heroines of fairy tales, the 'good' girls handsomely rewarded for their goodness, but rather the erotic and sensual women of Ferdowsi" (81).

One of these role models is Rudabeh, a fictional female character in *Shahnameh*. Nafisi notes: "Rudabeh is perhaps the first in a long line of literary characters over whom I

would find myself obsession and with whom in one way or another I would identify” (*Things* 77). She later acknowledges that her father’s portrayal of Rudabeh intensifies this feeling: “I should perhaps say that Father’s way of telling the story was also what made me like her” (79). Rudabeh is one of *Shahnameh*’s women that Nafisi praises because of their outstanding courage, which unlike the courage of men in *Shahnameh* is not physical. She writes how Rudabeh and the women of *Shahnameh* in general gave her a different perspective on female subjectivity:

[I]t was women like Rudabeh who planted in my mind the idea of a different kind of woman whose courage is private and personal. Without making any grand claims, without aiming to save humanity or defeat the forces of Satan, these women were engaged in a quiet rebellion, courageous not because it would get them accolades, but because they could not be otherwise. If they were limited and vulnerable, it was an audacious vulnerability, transcending the misogyny of their creator and his times. (81)

Nevertheless, the relationship of Self and nation, is not rendered only to the imaginary world in *Things*. Nafisi recalls the memory of disapproving gestures of her parents when she told Amoo Said, a learned relative, that her role model is Rudabeh, a fictional character in *Shahnameh*. The responses of both her mother and father were highly critical of her. Nafisi’s father comments: “There is so much wisdom in your mother’s insight that you should know your country’s history. You’ve reached an age when you need to take these matters seriously. It’s not enough to know the *Shahnameh*; you’ll have to start paying more attention to *real history*” [emphasis added] (74-75). Father advises her daughter to learn not only about the mythological past but also the “real history.” The father’s patriotic attitude is mostly noticeable when she reminds her daughter that after studying abroad she should come back and serve her country: “You’re going there to get an education, but we expect you to come back and serve your country—your place is here, in this country that has given you so much” (70-71).

In her memoir *Jasmine and Stars*, Fatemeh Keshavarz criticizes Nafisi for the absence of influential Iranian women in *Reading Lolita*, such as the poet Forough Farrokhzad, and the writer Shahrnush Parsipur. The works of these feminists are among the twentieth century literature of women’s emancipation in Iran. Keshavarz writes that *Reading Lolita* “does not mention Parsipur even in passing. It takes its own selective approach to retelling the reality of life in Iran: one in which big chunks of reality—

including Parsipur's writing—disappear altogether" (106). Unlike *Reading Lolita*, in which Iranian women are described mainly as victims of all kinds, and in which all the role models are chosen from fictional characters in Western literature, in *Things*, Iranian women—whether fictional or factual—are given voice and agency to be role models and paragons. Be it with the fictional Rudabeh, or the Minister of Education Dr. Parsay, the memoirist more openly recognizes Iranian women as a reflection of her national and gender identity. Hence, the autobiographical self in *Things* is not only more relational, but inclined to embrace the culture of the homeland rather than the West. Both of the literary figures that Keshavarz is missing in *Reading Lolita*, as an ignorant Orientalist gesture, have their own visible places in *Things*. The Iranian poet Forough, for instance, appears both in text and photographs in *Things*. The memoirist recalls reading her poems, introduces her to the readers, gives a short biography of her, and interprets some of her verses in the memoir. Furthermore, she relates Forough to her present life and to Rudabeh, her role model of all time: "Forough Farrokhzad's poems were embodiment of the potential I had detected in the fictional heroines I loved. She lived what she wrote and paid a high price for it. An invisible thread linked Rudabeh to Forough Farrokhzad. A certain boldness and openness in a culture that denied both" (168).

Moreover, there are other Iranian literary figures that Nafisi takes account of in *Things*. For instance, Houshang Golshiri (1938-2000), the author who regularly holds literary sessions in which Nafisi and others read and discuss Persian classic literature. Golshiri was one of the pioneers of modern Persian fiction who held creative workshops and literary discussions in Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution. Nafisi narrates how she pursued her own subject of interest (i.e. the search for individuality) through reading and discussing literature at Golshiri's literary group: "I had come to be preoccupied with the relationship between democracy and the novel, inspired by the fact that the rise of the novel in Iran was simultaneous with demands for democracy and freedom. I felt there must be a relationship between the celebration of individual voices in the novel and the polyphony of a democratic society" (239). Again, unlike *Reading Lolita*, which has almost no trace of Persian literature, *Things* dedicates a whole chapter to Iranian literature, especially its modern period, in which Nafisi analyzes modernist fictions. This time, the literature that arises as a means of resistance does not originate from the West, but the homeland.

In *Things*, Nafisi acknowledges her inclination towards her homeland, which can also be seen in her historical accounts in the memoir. History of the twentieth century Iran is narrated in *Things* with the necessary detail to provide the socio-political background for the personal and family-related events and decisions. Both personal and political resonate here with each other. For example, the father evokes Persian history and literature at his trial when he quotes from Ferdowsi in his defense: “Later my father told me his decision to draw from the classics was deliberate: he chose the best of Iran’s heritage, in order to show his enemies that they were not the true sons of this country, that Iran did have other traditions, other values, and that he, my father, represented them” (192). Another example is the comparison of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 with the Arab invasion of ancient Persia in the 7th century: “Writing about those years I am reminded of my father, who used to read passages from the *Shahnameh* about the conquest of the Persian Empire by the Arab army in the seventh century [...]. Who says our present is not already written by our past? Father would ask” (252).

Apart from such intertextualities in *Things*, there are moments when real life incidents of the family resonate with national events. One such is the separation of father and mother right after the Islamic Revolution. The memoirist’s father, continuously unhappy and disappointed with his family life, intends several times to leave his wife but does not do so until just after Islamic Revolution, as Nafisi writes: “He was trapped by his own image of himself as a good man. And what good man would leave his wife? It took the Islamic Revolution, the crumbling of the old social order, to facilitate a decision that he had been unable to carry out a decade and a half before” (255).

3.2.4. The Relationship between Self and Others

Nafisi’s second memoir is above all a book about her parents and their life in the socio-historical context of Iran. Hence, most of the book consists of the memoirist’s life in relation to her mother and father, interwoven with history of the country. Yet, there are other individuals whose lives are illuminated in the memoir. These people are either immediate “others” such as significant others, offspring, or non-immediate “others” such as relatives, family friends, and acquaintances.

The narration of relationships between the self and significant others—though not in detail—is briefly mentioned in *Things*. The memoirist recounts her marriage to her first

husband; the short and unhappy married life that followed and led to divorce; her American lover; and finally her second marriage and the years following it.

Writing about all these relationships provides a stage for Nafisi to talk about gender issues in the Iranian private lives, and also to challenge the traditional gender roles. While the first hastened marriage has some characteristics of arranged marriages, the second one, in contrast, demonstrates the memoirist's independence and maturity in choosing a life partner with whom she is more in tune.

Mehdi, the first husband, proposes to the young Azi and she accepts it, despite his traditional perspectives on gender roles that he holds and exhibits right from the beginning. In the proposal session he shows his disapproval of the relationship of Azi's parents with each other and of the gender roles in Azi's family, as Nafisi writes: "Only one person, [Mehdi] said, should wear the pants in a family and in your house that person is certainly not your father" (172). In their married life Mehdi bans Azi from smoking and drinking, arguing that women should not smell of smoke or alcohol and should always look their best (180). Nafisi later blames her mother, who encouraged this marriage at the time when her daughter was such a young and inexperienced girl, and at the time when her husband was serving his sentence of imprisonment. But the young Azi is blamable too, because she decides to marry someone who holds completely distinctive values from what she had always appreciated in men like her Father. Mehdi is not "flexible and tender" but is "decisive". Nafisi explains how she wanted to fit into the roles Mehdi had assigned her when she accepts to marry him (174). And it is Mehdi's decisiveness that later on becomes a reason for separation. Nafisi writes, "[h]e had very fixed ideas about [marriage], and had his own strict rules about the different roles a husband and wife should play" (174). Explaining more, Nafisi clarifies how these decisive men may appear firm in the beginning but in reality they are incapable of handling crises and the unexpected.

Subsequently, Nafisi writes how the first marriage was a contradiction to her ideals and how ashamed she felt after realizing her husband was poles apart from what she appreciated in men. She is ashamed of herself, most of all in front of her father who is still in jail during the wedding and honeymoon: "The first time I visited my father after the honeymoon I wore dark sunglasses and refused to take them off, and for a long time I took to wearing them inside. I was deeply ashamed. It was a shame that would not

wear off for a long time” (*Things* 178). The first marriage, after reaching a violent climatic phase, ends in divorce.

In her second marriage—this time with Bijan Naderi—Nafisi is closer to her own virtues and values. But the second marriage also has moments of dispute over gender roles and gender discrimination that is imposed on women in the Islamic homeland. As a man, Bijan has more freedom in Iran than his wife does to pursue his dreams. When Nafisi clarifies cultural and stately imposed gender discrimination against women in Iran, Bijan tries to convince her that, as a solution, the regime’s laws can be bypassed. Nafisi notes:

It is not that Bijan disagreed with me. Since my return to Tehran, I had, partly because of my sex and vocation, felt somewhat displaced, never wholly at home. He on the other hand, felt very much at home, and with the same focus he put into every project, he set out to actualize his dream of a permanent home—a dream he had been living with ever since he left Iran at the age of seventeen. Eighteen years after our return, he had created a home, almost an island, populated with his family, friends, and colleagues. Leaving this home was very painful for him. (291)

Nafisi debates the dilemma of whether to leave or remain in the homeland with her second husband. Apart from discussing gender roles and different opportunities that the homeland can provide for men versus women, the question of remaining and resisting or emigrating to live in the freedom of Western countries is here the issue of discussion and topic of dispute. If living in the homeland is defined differently for the memoirist versus her husband, leaving it would affect them also differently: “In the end both Bijan and I had our points. But the decision to leave or stay in Iran was very personal, and either way there would be a price to pay” (293).

The relationship of the memoirist and her brother in *Things* is displayed very briefly. When the memoirist talks about a common attitude or belief shared by the children of the family, the brother is often described by the pronoun “we.” The relationship of the siblings is defined equally in relation to their parents and not in relation to each other. The relational self thus becomes collective: “All our lives my brother and I were caught by the fictions my parents told us—fictions about themselves as well as others. Each wanted us to judge the other in his or her favor” (xvii). But not all of the instances are like this, as from time to time the brother emerges also as an individual.

Another individual that is depicted in the memoir is Aunt Mina, a friend of Mother whom Mother describes as “[t]he *real* sister [she] never had” (35). Aunt Mina who had been the mother’s competitive classmate at school shares hopes and dreams with the mother as her best friend. Mother and Aunt Mina are described as “inseparable friends” who spent most of their time together until a “falling-out” that finally separates them (35). What brings Mother and Aunt Mina together is their unrealized capacities and potentials as Nafisi suggests: “Perhaps this is what made them stay together for so many years, despite their enormous differences in temperament and despite the fact that, in some respects, they very much disapproved of or, more accurately, could not tolerate each other” (40).

Aunt Mina as the only close friend of Mother from her childhood is like a family member who knows certain truths about the memoirist’s mother that no one else may know or is willing to share with Azi. It is through Aunt Mina that the dark secret of the grandmother’s suicide is disclosed to Azi (284). Aunt Mina is a version of the memoirist’s mother, her alter ego, who connects the unknown past to the present and explains the gaps in her mother’s history.

Amoo Said and Ameh Hamdam, who are both relatives, are among those individuals that Azi venerates and looks to as role models. Both of them emerge in the extended family as black sheep, digressing from norms and traditions: “Amoo Said was a constant source of controversy within our family. He gained a great deal of notoriety when he published a roman à clef, *Halfway to Paradise*, exposing the decadence and political incompetence of Iran’s elite and their dubious loyalties to foreign powers, especially the omnipresent British” (73). Regarding Ameh Hamdam Nafisi notes: “[I]n a society where ‘femininity’ was so overdefined, her refusal to comply with conventional notions of womanhood was both courageous and exceptional. Women like her were pioneers—highly educated, usually unmarried—who dedicated themselves to their work and developed a style that was deliberately unfeminine” (92). Despite their out-of-norm personalities, both of these individuals are described with enormous respect in the memoir. They are paragons of virtue who the memoirist of *Things* holds as ideals.

Amoo Said and Ameh Hamdam are sources of inspiration for the memoirist. Amoo Said, a cultivated man with literary reputation, lives a life of financial difficulties that is quite different from the life of Nafisi, as she describes in the following: “[H]is way of

life presented itself as an alternative to the wealth and power my parents both coveted and shunned” (73). As mentioned before, the question that Amoo Said asks Azi about who she would want to be like and Azi’s answer in which she chooses a mythological fictional character in *Shahnameh* later brings forward discussions over personal and national identity and responsibilities.

Ameh Hamdam’s life and concerns contribute to the gender consciousness of the adolescent Azi, who at the time is leaving the country to study abroad. Unlike her peers, Ameh Hamdam, as one of the first Iranian women who leaves the country to educate in the West, dedicates herself to work after returning to Iran and refuses to marry. Even in her appearance she stands out by breaking the gender norms: “I remember her well, because she looked so different from the other women who came to our house. She wore little makeup and always dressed in soft browns. [...] And yet Ameh Hamdam was pitied. Some felt she belonged to the category of women who had gone to waste, because they were unwomanly” (91-93). Ameh Hamdam reminds Azi that she is one of the privileged girls of a country in which gender discrimination is prevalent and women have to fight for their basic rights, such as education: “[Ameh Hamdam] told me I owed a lot to these women because they were the ones who had built the first public schools for girls in Iran. They were beaten, ostracized, and sometimes even banished from their hometown for their efforts” (92).

In *Things*, Nafisi not only relates herself to her previous and contemporary generation but to the next generation, i.e. her children. Here she is herself the mother. Nevertheless, her motherhood is hardly highlighted or given any particular significance in the memoir. Her children come to her as “gifts,” as she describes (258). She mentions that she loves them but apart from rare instances there are hardly any traces of the children to be found in the memoir, except in the family photographs.

Nonetheless, in the memoir, Nafisi’s being a mother is related to the general concept of motherhood. The relationship she builds with her children helps her to have a better understanding of motherhood in general and the relationship with her own mother in particular. Nafisi experiences pregnancy and motherhood, while she herself is still in a daughter-mother relationship with her mother. Her becoming a mother bolsters her relationship with her own mother. As an example, when she is pregnant with her second

baby, Nafisi finds out one night that she has symptoms of heart attack and she reaches for her mother's help. The following passage describes the incident:

I couldn't breathe and at that moment I did not think of my husband, who was sleeping next to me, but of my mother. I took a candle and walked down the stairs (her door to the internal staircase was always open when she was home). I did not knock, I just went in and woke her up. She did not protest or ask why I had woken her up at three in the morning. She called a heart surgeon who was a distant cousin, woke him up, and explained the symptoms. She came back with a glass of water and a Valium in her hand. 'Now, now, you'll be okay,' she said. 'Just take this, one pill won't hurt your baby, and you'll feel better.' She sat by me, massaging my back. I said, 'Mom, what if this child is harmed, what if he is already dead?' She laughed lightly. 'Nothing will happen to the child unless something happens to his mother. Let's take care of you first.' She made me sleep in her bed that night, while she slept on a light mattress at the foot of the bed. (259)

Things is not only about the relationships of the autobiographical self with contemporary individuals of her lifetime, but with those characters that do not belong to the timeframe of Nafisi's life. Time and again, dead people, such as Saifi, the mother's first husband, and Nafisi's grandparents, emerge as ghostly presences, haunting the memoir.

Saifi, the first husband of Nafisi's mother, occupies the whole first chapter in *Things*. Like the young version of Nafisi's mother, Saifi, who is dead for a long time, is constructed by what others remember of him and by the old photographs that shows him on his wedding day, or on a mountain. He is present at once in the memory of family members, and is absent from the reality of their life. His ghostlike character is described as the following: "[Saifi] insinuated himself into our lives with the same ease with which he stood behind [Mother] in their wedding pictures, appearing unexpectedly and slyly whirling her way from us" (4-5). This ghostly figure affects the life of Nafisi's mother, and therefore, her own life. Mother always talks of him as the prince charming of her life, a reminiscence of all the glory and happiness of the past time. However, other people have different opinions about Saifi and his relationship with Mother. It is Nafisi's father who divulges Saifi's terminal illness to the memoirist, and it is Aunt Mina who associates the whole depressive mood of Mother with her ominous marriage with Saifi: "'I sometimes think that Saifi was very bad for your mother,' Aunt Mina said. 'She never recovered after his death. She wore black for a long time'" (284).

To bring this chapter to a close, talking about the relational self, a thematic of subjectivity that Moore-Gilbert associates with the postcolonial autobiographers, Nafisi in her two memoirs displays two different selfhoods that do not oppose each other, but are complementary. In *Reading Lolita* Nafisi is in search of individuality and monadic subjectivity. She marginalizes “others” and centers herself as an individual who is now deprived of the right to her own body. The girls of her reading group, her students at university, and her colleagues at work are all described to some extent as collective and abstract. Her mother, who is the major character in *Things* appears in *Reading Lolita* no more than a few instances. Everything is centered on the autobiographical self, trapped with no apparent way out. In *Reading Lolita*, there is no trace of the memoirist’s father, her brother, her first husband, her mother’s first husband, and many other individuals with whom the autobiographical self relates in *Things*. While the autonomy of the autobiographical “I” is underscored in *Reading Lolita*, the opposite is true in *Things*: relatedness is privileged over separateness.

The study of Nafisi’s memoirs demonstrates that attribution of gender characteristics to life-writings should be taken into account more cautiously. Most feminist critics in Autobiography Studies argue that women’s presentation of the self is relational. Some, like Chodorow, suggest that the female presentation always reproduces the recursive discourse of motherhood for women, and thus women are quintessentially relational. Nonetheless, some feminists challenge this universality of gender-related features due to various other elements such as geography, class, race, and education that differentiate and disperse any universal characteristics. Nafisi shows how a woman can represent different autobiographical self-portraits, one inclined to autonomy, the other disposed to being relational.

As mentioned previously, Moore-Gilbert also suggests the variation of selfhood in divisions of women’s autobiographies, such as life-writings of minorities in Western societies, or works of postcolonial women. The autonomous selfhood that Nafisi displays in her first memoir, *Reading Lolita*, might be seen “strategically and temporarily legitimate” as a means of resistance in the “indigenous patriarchy” in which women are “marginalised and anonymised” (Moore-Gilbert 18-19). But again, the subjectivity can be represented differently due to various situations. Therefore, Nafisi’s second memoir, which is a gallery of her personal relationships with her significant others, her indigenous role models and literary figures, is an homage to her personal

past, to her parent's history and life, and to many things that were silenced, or simply forgotten in her first memoir.

Conclusion

To conclude, this dissertation was an effort to present a literature review of the theoretical concerns in postcolonial life-writings, and to analyze two thematics of postcolonial subjectivity in Azar Nafisi's memoirs, as examples of the exilic memoirs—a subcategory in the field of postcolonial life-writings. Nafisi's autobiographies also belong to a larger group, namely, life-writings of Iranian women. Her memoirs, as autobiographical works of a woman living in Diaspora, are a useful source of study both for feminist, and postcolonial scholars of Autobiography Studies. Both of these groups of critics have debated the classical characterization of the genre and its stereotypical labeling.

In the first chapter of this dissertation a historical overview of Autobiography Studies from the postcolonial perspective is offered. Moore-Gilbert, comparing the history of feminist Autobiography Studies with its postcolonial counterpart, shows how the latter can benefit and learn from the former. As Moore-Gilbert (xx) remarks, three thematics of subjectivity that critics have found in women's life-writings—the fragmented self, the relational self, and the embodied self—are also present in postcolonial autobiographies. Two of these thematics of subjectivity were studied in the course of this dissertation in autobiographical works of Azar Nafisi, namely, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), and *Things I've Been Silent About* (2008).

By focusing on *Reading Lolita* in Chapter 2, issues of body and embodiment in presenting the autobiographical self were discussed. Valuing corporeality is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of autobiography. Intertwined with many socio/political aspects of the autobiographer's life, writing of body is a political act and can be interpreted politically. In *Reading Lolita*, issues of embodiment of the self and others play a substantial role. Being obsessed with the transition between covering and uncovering the body, Nafisi fights over regaining the ownership right to the female body and thereby seeks individuality under an authoritative and patriarchal state.

To demonstrate how embodiment is realized in *Reading Lolita*, the following topics were discussed in this dissertation: the symbolic construction of ego in the Lacanian sense through the uneasy confrontation of the self and its image; craving color—an

aspect of embodiment and physicality—as a call for individuality; the embodiment of place and space and the vain effort to separate the private space from the public one, as they constantly transgress and violate each other; the colonization of the female body by the ruling systems of the society through the veil, surveillance and censorship; and the decolonization of the body through literature and imagination as forms of resistance and liberation.

Moreover, the deficiencies and flaws of the discourse that *Reading Lolita* constructs for decolonizing the body are discussed in Chapter 2: Most of Nafisi's female characters remain abstract and almost identical; pursuing individuality is radicalized to seek refuge in isolation, egotism and eventually hatred of the masses. Gradually the gap between the individual and the collective is widened as dichotomies such as Us/Them are emphasized in the memoir. Finally, there is an inconsistency between what it means to have appropriate versus inappropriate control over one's body.

In Chapter 3 an analysis of the relational self—another thematic of subjectivity suggested by Moore-Gilbert—was offered in Nafisi's second memoir. The relational self — as opposed to the autonomous self, which was favored by scholars of canonical male autobiographers—was suggested by some feminist critics to describe the autobiographical self in women's life-writings. However, the universality of this idea was later questioned by feminists who argued that the reductionist perspective was ignoring the variety of selfhood with which class, race, geography, and education inform women's subjectivities.

The relational autobiographical self in *Things* is a response to **the censored relational self** of the memoirist in the past and is originating from a need to fill the void that she feels after her parents' death. Searching for the “true” version of her mother becomes a major preoccupation of the autobiographer. This search for the truth, however, is ultimately in vain. Nafisi depicts a life-long relationship with her mother that changes over the years, and develops in various phases, relatively maturing at the end. These phases can be summarized as resistance, nurturing, and dependence. The memoirist establishes a literary relationship with her father in the memoir, as the father's written voice becomes a second direct narrating point of view in *Things*. The daughter reconstructs her father partly through his own written word, and partly through the commentary, annotation, and interpretation of his autobiographical text. The

relationship of the self and nation is shown by recounting the historical moments of the country to provide the personal with a political background in which the memoirist places the family history. Father's preoccupation with Persian literature helps establishing a nationalist identity that is constructed for the memoirist through Persian mythology. Nevertheless, the relationship of the self and nation, is not rendered only to the imaginary world and it matures and extends into the real history, the history that we read from the memoirist's perspective. Compared to *Reading Lolita*, the autobiographical self in *Things* is not only more relational, but inclined to embrace the culture of the homeland rather than West. Additionally, the autobiographical subject in *Things* builds relationships with other individuals such as significant others, offspring, relatives, family friends, and acquaintances. Writing about all these relationships provides a stage for Nafisi to discuss several social and cultural issues including gender roles and immigration, two heated concerns for Iranians, and especially for Iranian women.

The study of Nafisi's memoirs demonstrates that attribution of gender characteristics to life-writings should be taken into account more cautiously. Nafisi's life-writings shows how a woman can represent different autobiographical self-portraits, one inclined to autonomy, the other disposed to being relational. Although Nafisi displays an autonomous selfhood in her first memoir, her second memoir is an homage to her personal past, to her parents' histories and lives, and to many individuals and collectives that were silenced, or simply forgotten in her first memoir.

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