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Nada Abdelmoneim

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In memory of my grandparents

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1. Introduction

1.1 Immanently Global: Transcultural Literature

[L]iterature is becoming *immanently* global, that is, that individual works are increasingly informed and constituted by social, political, and even linguistic trends that are not limited to a single nation or region. Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to regard contemporary texts as simply the products of, for example, German, Nigerian, or Chinese writers, or even of European, African, and Asian authors. With the globalization of the world economy, a true world literature, which is to say a *global* literature, is being created.

(Pizer 213)

I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men ... I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹

I describe the four texts that make up the subject of my thesis as 'texts between worlds' for they are examples of transcultural texts which transcend one nation, culture, continent or language. Two works of fiction and two memoirs, these works by Iranian, Iranian American, and Pakistani British² authors written in English reflect the multivalent nature of contemporary writing across and between cultures. As Arianna Dagnino in an essay titled "Global Mobility, Transcultural Literature, and Multiple Modes of Modernity" explains:

¹ Qtd. in Damrosch 1.

² "[Writers] often complain that their agency is subsumed or undermined by the association of their works with overly determined local political affiliations, whether national or otherwise. Any sanctioned and saleable 'authentic' identity associated with their texts hardly grants them significant control, after all, as what is marketed as a personal biographical connection actually masks – and is designed to mask – writers' larger detachment from the relevant processes of production, distribution, and consumption. As their books reach a variety of audiences with conflicting tendencies and interests, writers are unable to determine how exactly the attachment between authorial persona and text is constructed or received." (Brouillette 4)

By being voluntarily “on the move” outside their native cultures and homelands, these writers--more (or less) educated, more (or less) well off and socially advantaged--seem to be thriving in the freedom obtained and the opportunities acquired through patterns of physical and cultural deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations. While cultures (together with languages and identities) are becoming more fluid and intermingled through their complex permeations, transcultural writers are making these processes particularly manifest in their works.

(Dagnino 132)

Intertwining the Global South with the Global North, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) by Azar Nafisi is set in Iran yet written and published in the US, *Iran Awakening* (2006) by Shirin Ebadi is set in Iran and written and published (with great difficulty) in the US, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Mohsin Hamid is set in New York, Lahore (Pakistan), Manila (Philippines) and Santiago (Chile) and published in the UK, and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) by Nadeem Aslam set in small villages in Pakistan and Afghanistan was also published in the UK. Categorized as New Literatures in English³ and as Muslim writing⁴ these four works transcend even these categories and are best theorised as transcultural texts. As Frank Schulze-Engler highlights:

Following in the wake of previous concepts in cultural and literary studies such as creolization, hybridity and syncretism, and signalling a family relationship with terms such as transnationality, translocality, and transmigration, ‘transcultural’ terminology has unobtrusively, but powerfully, edged its way into contemporary theoretical and critical discourse.

Whilst transculturality in literature is a comparatively novel phenomenon⁵, transculturality itself is a more dated phenomenon. Edward Said had long since stated in *Culture and Imperialism* that “[p]artly because of empire, all cultures are involved in

³ “The term ‘New Literatures in English’ started to emerge in the 1970s and became associated with critics such as Dieter Riemenschneider and Bruce King. The term denotes the attempt to pay special attention to the changed socio-political situation in the former Commonwealth countries by redefining the literary and cultural tradition of those countries.” (Helff 75)

⁴ i. “*Muslim* is derived from the Arabic word that denotes the *person* who espouses the religion of Islam or is shaped by its cultural impact, irrespective of being secular, agnostic or practising believer.” (Malak qtd. in Matthes 18) ii. “Many Muslims have developed a ‘refusal to remain invisible’ – and writing is part of that refusal.” (Matthes 16). iii. Only one of the authors of the works selected would refer to herself as a Muslim writer so therefore I have chosen not to describe the four authors as Muslim authors.

⁵ Dagnino qualifies: “The presence of transcultural writers, transcultural texts, and transcultural characters is not new in the history of literature. Precursors and representatives of a transcultural sensibility may be found in all ages, from ancient times (let us just think of Ovid or Martial) to the nineteenth and twentieth century (with such forerunners as Joseph Conrad, Marguerite Yourcenar, Paul Bowles), without mentioning the polyglot writers sans patrie of the Enlightenment (Voltaire, Giacomo Casanova, Carlo Goldoni) and pre-Enlightenment (Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift).” (Dagnino 137)

one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.” (xxix) Nonetheless, contemporary critics highlight the “increased blending” between cultures as “strikingly new” as Wolfgang Welsch elucidates:

My objective [...] was to use [‘transculturality’] to describe a strikingly new, contemporary feature of cultures originating from their increased blending. The main idea was that deep differences between cultures are today diminishing more and more, that contemporary cultures are characterized by cross-cutting elements – and in this sense are to be comprehended as transcultural rather than monocultural. [...] [T]he inherited concept of cultures as homogenous and closed entities has become highly inappropriate in comprehending the constitution of today’s cultures.

(Welsch 4)

Significantly and in iteration of Homi Bhabha’s writing on hybridity and third spaces⁶, Welsch makes the important point that transculturality leads not to a “uniformization” of cultures but rather to “the emergence of diversity of a new type.” (Welsch 11). The blending and intermingling of cultures leads to a third space, therefore, in which a new and diverse hybrid culture develops, disparate from the source culture. *Trans-culturation*, a term first theorised by Fernando Ortiz in the 1940’s, further clarifies Welsch’s “diversity of a new type” and the idea of a resultant and originary third space:

Every transculturation [...] is a process in which both parts of the equation are modified, a process from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, nor even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent. To describe this process the word *trans-culturation* [...] provides us with a term that does not contain the implication of one certain culture toward which the other must tend, but an exchange between two⁷ cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both co-operating to bring about a new reality of civilization.

(Malinowski Introduction to *Cuban Counterpoint* qtd. in Stein 251)

Similarly, Meyer-Kalkus conjectures, “[authors] live and write in the spaces between [culture and nation (and language)]:”

No longer viable is the old model of literary scholarship in which a single nation or region and its language or language family is the focus. It is becoming increasingly difficult to relegate authors to a single culture and nation – they live and write in the spaces between. Those who compose their works in one of the great languages of global intercourse (e.g. English, French, Spanish, or Arabic)

⁶“In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha ... describes hybridity as ‘the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge’. He explains the notion of third space: ‘This third place displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom’ ... Third space allows for unanticipated forms of agency and resistance ... It is a space where authority is negotiated, translated and re-inscribed ...” (Mishra and Shirazi 195-196)

⁷ Two or more cultures.

not only live between cultures but address readers outside their own lands of origin, such as the Indians, Pakistanis, and Bengalis in London, the Chinese in New York, or the North Africans in France. Many of these have been able to effect a linguistic change and write in languages that are not their mother tongue or their “second mother tongue.”

(Meyer-Kalkus 96-97)

Transcultural texts, furthermore transcend the boundaries between periphery and metropolis, written as they are from multiple positions, often times within both, literally and figuratively. Moreover, the production and distribution of transcultural texts tends to do away with traditional distinctions of marginality or dominance as they are often award-winning texts written in English and published in the metropolis. Transcultural texts exhibit characteristics that reflect aspects of the dominant and the marginal culture blending the two, thereby deconstructing the dichotomy that they are constructed by. Transcultural texts further problematize explanations/arguments such as Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of transculturation, rendering them dated and unusable.⁸

The third space or space-in-between produced by transcultural texts is linguistic⁹, cultural, literary and altogether novel¹⁰. Never seen before combinations of text with reading, of content with context, of language and content, and of transcultural dialogue are made manifest in works by transcultural authors. For example, Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* highlights the transformative power of canonical English and American fiction in a Tehrani setting overlooking the picturesque Alboraz Mountains. *Iran Awakening* is set in post-revolutionary Iran and is narrated in English in the US by lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Shirin Ebadi (with the editorial assistance of Iranian American writer Azadeh Moaveni). Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* features extended intercultural dialogue between a transcultural Pakistani narrator and an anonymous American interlocutor at a tea-house in Lahore

⁸ Pratt uses the term transculturation “to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.” (*Imperial Eyes* 6)

⁹ See section *English as A World Language* below.

¹⁰ Dagnino highlights the following phenomena that contribute to making transcultural writing and criticism new: “[I]t is only now [...] that the pattern of modern migrations and globalising phenomena generates new opportunities to **undergo transcultural experiences** and **develop transcultural sensibilities**. This translates into an increase in the numbers not only of transcultural writers but also of those scholars and writers who are promoting a transcultural perspective in literary studies and in the humanities in general. (Dagnino 137)[emphasis added]

in a context of mutual distrust following the cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001. In Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* the events of 9/11 are described in Pakistan as "The *Battle* of The World Trade Center and the Pentagon [...]. The logic is that there are no innocent people in a guilty nation"¹¹ (Aslam 6) as US-led war rages in nearby Afghanistan.

As discussed above, all four of the works selected possess transcultural features¹². "[T]ransposed in literary terms" as Dagnino highlights, "this transcultural sensibility":

- records and expresses the confluent nature of cultures,
- [supersedes] the traditional dichotomies--North and South, the West and the Rest, coloniser and colonised, dominator and dominated, native and immigrant, national and ethnic--that have thus far characterised multicultural and postcolonial discourses [...]
- records the re-shaping of national collective imaginaries in their efforts to adjust to the path laid down in a new age of transnational and supra-national economic, political, social, and cultural processes.

(Dagnino 133-134)]

Furthermore, the two novels selected, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *The Blind Man's Garden* can both be characterised as transcultural novels using criteria outlined by Sissy Helff in "Shifting Perspectives: The Transcultural Novel" "if one of the following aspects applies":

[F]irst, if the narrator and/or the narrative challenge(s) the collective identity of a particular community; second, if experiences of border crossing and transnational identities challenge the narrators' lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*); and third, if traditional notions of 'home' are disputed. All these indicators have a high impact on modes of storytelling, especially if the narrative introduces an unreliable narrator, because the latter challenges both the structure of a text and the reader's perception.

(Helff 83)

¹¹ This is a Pakistani view as narrated by the text.

¹² "[T]ranscultural writers show 'a determination to make a home of any place the self inhabits.' It is clear that these culturally and physically mobile writers tend to acquire an identity mode and express cultural sensibilities that distance them from the traditional categories of the migrant/exile/diasporic/postcolonial writers that have dominated the critical discourse of the second half of the twentieth century. That is why it seems preferable to refer to them, and their related creative outputs, as 'transcultural.' As Mikhail N. Epstein explains, a transcultural orientation is acquired by living 'diffused' in a new dimension (a 'Continuum'), simultaneously 'inside and outside of all existing cultures. (Dagnino 133)

1.2 English as a World Language

The Sun never sets on the English [language.] ¹³

I am more and more convinced that [language] is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men ... I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National [language] is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world [language] is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

All the works selected for discussion in this essay are written in the English language, which it is important to note, is not the first language or Mother tongue of any of its authors. The question arises as to why Azar Nafisi, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam (Shirin Ebadi received editorial and linguistic assistance) write in English and what this means about their texts, their identities and their anticipated readership. Why write in English and what does it mean to write in English? In answering these questions concerns about the nature of English *itself* arises--given the fact that English has become ubiquitous internationally¹⁴ and that is mastered to a very high degree by these and other transcultural authors. Rather than look at each author's individual decision to write in English, I have chosen in this section to explore the status of English as an international language and investigate Englishes' evolving identity first, rather than that of its transcultural users, which will be discussed later in this essay.

¹³ In its original formulation: 'The empire on which the sun never sets' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_empire_on_which_the_sun_never_sets

David Crystal concurs: "[B]y the end of the [20th] century ... English became the language 'on which the sun never sets'." (75)

¹⁴ Crystal notes: "A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of it people – especially their political and military power." (9)

"By the most common estimates, 400 million people speak English as a first language, another 300 million to 500 million as a fluent second language, and perhaps 750 million as a foreign language.

The largest English-speaking nation in the world, the United States, has only about 20 percent of the world's English speakers. In Asia alone, an estimated 350 million people speak English, about the same as the combined English-speaking populations of Britain, the United States and Canada.

Thus the English language no longer "belongs" to its native speakers but to the world, just as organized soccer, say, is an international sport that is no longer associated with its origins in Britain." (Mydans)

Transculturality in the English language too, leads to a Bhabian third space in which English is best considered an independent international language, neither the sole possession of the native speaker (fmr colonizer) or the non-native speaker (fmr colonized) as Frenkel suggests, and Widdowson partly suggests, below:

Seeking to avoid the essentialization and naturalization of nations and cultures, Bhabha studies the space constituted around the encounters between the colonizers and colonized. This space is not entirely governed by the laws of either ruler or ruled, and it is here that hybrid cultures [and languages] are constructed that belong to neither of them but that are instead a fusion of the two. In Bhabha's terms, this is the third space of in-between. (Bhabha, 1996)
(Frenkel 928)

How English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, or the United States, or anywhere else. They have no say in the matter, no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant. The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it. To grant such custody of the language is necessarily to arrest its development and so undermine its international status. It is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is the international means of communication. But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it.¹⁵

(Widdowson qtd. in Saraceni 11)

Widdowson suggests that non-native speakers of English are the inheritors of the English language. Contrary to that, I would like to hypothesize a new conception of the English language, as neither the Queen's English nor that of the non-native speaker, but rather as an international language belonging to *all* contemporary speakers of English world-wide. This English sometimes referred to as 'Globish'¹⁶ would be a hybrid of native English and non-native English resulting in that very English that is spoken globally today: a combination of Englishes neither uniquely native or uniquely non-native but a *blend of English* understood by all and mastered by some. The question, as Widdowson has so astutely pointed out, is a question of the identity of English. *Who* does the English language belong to? I would venture to say that it belongs to all speakers of the language, native and other,¹⁷ but that it is no longer the

¹⁵ David Crystal echoes Widdowson's view: "Indeed, if there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it anymore." (2)

¹⁶ Globish or World Standard Spoken English is a simplified international form of English. (Mydans)

¹⁷ Crystal agrees: "[E]veryone who has learned [English] now owns it – 'has a share in it' might be more accurate – and has the right to use it in the way they want." (2)

sole intellectual property of Great Britain.¹⁸ **After empire, language must be reconceived depending on its usage and no longer on its origins.**¹⁹ This then, is the English languages' third space as Bill Ashcroft highlights:

The continuing and heated debate in postcolonial studies over the use of the colonial language occurs because language is imputed to be the embodiment of culture *par excellence*. Yet what postcolonial writing demonstrates is that language itself is a zone of difference, struggle and transformation²⁰ ... [as well as] a zone of identity.²¹ Language, most notably in the transcultural performance of postcolonial writing, is a Third Space of enunciation between the poles of cultural identity, a space within which cultural identities themselves are transformed.

(Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice* 120)

In the introduction to *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities* Franz Schulze-Engler suggests that instead of a World English of international formulation (as I have endorsed) that the "English-speaking world is multi- rather than monolingual": "The idea of 'locating' culture and literature exclusively in the context of ethnicities or nations is rapidly losing plausibility throughout an 'English-speaking world' that has long since been multi- rather than monolingual." (x) While there is little doubt that English varies considerably between locale and could be somehow

¹⁸ Crystal concurs: "English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought of as 'owned' by any single nation. (26)

¹⁹ Salman Rushdie too, argues for the decolonization of the English language as Bolton explicates in an essay titled "Creativity and world Englishes":

In 1982, Rushdie published an article in *The Times*, entitled 'The Empire writes back with a vengeance', in which he declaimed that the English language "needs to be decolonized to be remade in other images, if those of us who use it from positions outside Anglo-Saxon culture are to be more than artistic Uncle Toms" (Rushdie 1982: 8). He then continued:

English, no longer an English language, now grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language for themselves [and] writers of the caliber of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, R. K. Narayan, and many others are busily forging English into new shapes [...] [T]hanks to the immigrations of the 1950s, 1960s, these new literatures are arriving in Britain. And it may be that English literature will benefit from the presence in these islands of observers with beady eyes and without Anglo-Saxon attitudes. It's possible to argue that Britain needs decolonizing too; that too many of the old imperial attitudes – jingoism, xenophobia a sense of automatic moral superiority in all things – still lie, just below the surface, in British culture and even in 'English' English (Rushdie 1982: 8). (Bolton 459)

[Of course Ngugi wa Thiong'o has since abandoned writing in English, preferring to write in his native Gikuyu. See Ngugi *Decolonizing the Mind*.]

²⁰As Ashcroft explains earlier in his essay: "[L]anguage does not repress speaking subjects in and of itself. It provides the medium within which power circulates and that power can be usurped, appropriated and used as cultural capital." (*Caliban's Voice* 119)

²¹ In the original text Ashcroft writes, "Yet what postcolonial writing demonstrates is that language itself is a zone of difference, struggle and transformation rather than a zone of identity," which contradicts the paragraph's concluding sentence which speaks of a hybrid, Third Space of cultural *identity*: "a space in which cultural identities themselves are transformed." (*Caliban's Voice* 120)

conceived of as “multilingual”, I find it more effective to speak of *one* English language with English roots and international offshoots while maintaining the language’s unitary identity.

Linguists such as David Crystal suggest that since it is unprecedented in human history that a *global* language (such as English) has developed, it is very difficult to predict how English’s spread (and identity) will evolve: “This is the first time we actually have a language spoken genuinely globally by [almost] every country in the world[.] There are no precedents to help us see what will happen.” (Crystal quoted in Mydans) Other linguists referred to by Mydans believe that English “[r]iding the crest of globalization and technology...dominates the world as no language ever has, and [...] may never be dethroned as the king of languages.”

Ashcroft in an article titled, “Speaking Past Colonialism: Language and Transformation in Post-Colonial Dialogue” writes a fitting conclusion for this intervention on language by highlighting the ways in which language has become “a means of liberation, of interpolation and self-representation”:

In the end language is the perfect model for the cultural engagements that occur in globalization. Globalization, like language, although conceived as a means of control by imperial powers, has extended far beyond the empire’s control. It has become, potentially, a means of liberation, of interpolation and self-representation, not to mention an avenue to improving quality of life. Whatever language becomes the medium of this global arena – and it will probably be English – it will be valuable for more than cursing. Caliban will transform that cursing into victory as he appropriates Prospero’s books and uses the global language for his own purposes.

(Ashcroft, *Past Colonialism* 43)

1.3 The Decolonial and the Postcolonial

Colonialism continues to live on in ways that perhaps we have only begun to recognize.

(Dirks 23)

[C]olonization is not behind us but has acquired a new form in a transnational world.

(Mignolo, *DSR* 1)

Frantz Fanon, or at least his American translators, famously wrote of a dying colonialism. If today we hear of a dying postcolonialism, it is because no amount of parsing can rid the term of its many ironies. Alongside the 'post' of a supposed aftermath lies the metallic reality of a penetrating, if at times indirect, imperialism—still deepening in Puerto Rico and Palestine, and recently expanding into significant new territory in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, replete with their pro-Western juntas and complicit local satrapies. Colonialism, it seems, is not altogether dead. The immiseration wrought by capital continues to express itself in broadly cultural, not only military or financial, ways, displaying all the hallmarks of that older system of resettlement and re-education. Quite apart from the Western dominance of global news, entertainment and trends in higher education, a massive diaspora of semi-permanent legions of Western tourists, expatriate fun-seekers, missionaries, mercenaries, academic theorists, real estate speculators, and diplomatic ensembles, all make the late-nineteenth-century era of the Berlin Treaty look comparatively underdeveloped.

The term 'postcolonial' is constitutively troubled, then, since it carries with it the strategic temporizing of its inception—the incongruity of its discursive tones and themes, in contrast with a rather blunter reality of imperial propaganda, foreign torture chambers and the stealing of others' lands.

(Brennan 67)

In this essay the term decolonial is favoured over the term postcolonial for as Tim Brennan writes in "Subaltern Stakes" the term "'postcolonial' is constitutively troubled" by the fact that it implies a post (a past) to the colonial, which while its form may have changed, remnants of it are still very much present and can even be found in new inscriptions as in Iraq and Afghanistan. The term postcolonial has served its

usefulness in the academy²² and now is best replaced by a term like *decolonial*²³ that indicates the constant need to respond to and remove the long-term and entrenched consequences of colonialism.

In an article titled, "In the Neocolony: Destiny, Destination and the Traffic in Meaning," Mary Louise Pratt asks "[i]n what sense...do we live in a postcolonial era?":

Is "postcoloniality" a state which has been achieved, or one to which we aspire? In a statement like that, who is the "we"? Are some of "us" more postcolonial than others? Or does the term describe a planetary "state of the system," a *coyuntura*²⁴ which is being lived out in myriad ways, in myriad subject positions and a vast array of geopolitical contexts?

(460)

Pratt in asking the questions above problematizes the term "postcolonial" suggesting that perhaps it is not a fitting term due to its ambiguity and its "pre-maturely celebratory" (McClintock 91) nature in so far as it suggests that "colonialism and Euro-imperialism are behind us, no longer important determinants of the contemporary world." (Pratt 460) Indeed Pratt has pinpointed the main difference between the postcolonial and the decolonial--the idea that "the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to decolonization" as Grosfoguel emphasizes below:

One of the most powerful myths of the 20th century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of a "postcolonial" world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same "colonial power matrix". With juridical-political decolonization we moved from a period of "global colonialism" to the current period of "global coloniality". Although "colonial administrations" have been almost entirely eradicated and the majority of the periphery is politically organized into independent states, non-European people are still living under crude European/Euro- American exploitation and domination. The

²² Brennan provides a short history of the discipline: "Postcolonial studies emerged uncertainly, without even a settled name, primarily within academic departments of literature. In retrospect, certain signature events appear now to have helped call it into life: the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, the conference on 'Europe and its Others' at Essex University in 1984, and the special issue on 'Race, Writing, and Difference' from *Critical Inquiry* (1985), the most prestigious American journal in the humanities. As the postcolonial began to coalesce around a number of related themes, its brief acquired consistency: to expand university curricula in order to include non-Western sources, to uncover and promote historical acts of native resistance, and to challenge the misrepresentations of imperial history, forging a new vocabulary to contest Eurocentrism. On all of these grounds, the initiative proved very successful and its effects—not only in scholarship but in mainstream publishing and the arts—have, over the years, been largely positive." (68)

²³ Walter D. Mignolo explains the origins of the term as used by the Latin American theorists: "[W]hen Anibal Quijano introduced the concept of *coloniality*, and suggested disengaging and delinking from Western epistemology, he conceived that project as decolonization: decoloniality became an epistemic and political project." (*DWSM* xxv)

²⁴ conjuncture

old colonial hierarchies of European versus non-European remain in place and are entangled with the "international division of labour" and accumulation of capital at a world-scale (Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2002).

(Grosfoguel, *EDT*)

1.4 Decolonial Aesthetics

When the people are ready, the crucial questions will be of how many ideas are available for the reorganization of social life. The ideas, many of which will unfold through years of engaged political work, need not be perfect, for in the end, it will be the hard, creative work of the communities that have taken them on. That work is the concrete manifestation of political imagination.

(Gordon qtd. in *DSWM* 53)

Decoloniality focuses on changing the terms of the conversation and not only its content.

(Mignolo, *GSK* 275)

In an article titled “The New Cultural Politics of Difference”, Cornel West captures the spirit of what I wish to express as decolonial aesthetics borrowing the term *decolonial* from the Latin American theorists which have been discussed in the previous section. West expresses the ‘new cultural politics of difference’ as:

[N]either simply oppositional in contesting the mainstream (or *malestream*) for inclusion, nor transgressive in the avant-gardist sense of shocking conventional bourgeois audiences. Rather, they are distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action and, if possible, to enlist collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy and individuality. This perspective impels these cultural critics and artists to reveal, as an integral component of their production, the very operations of power within their immediate work contexts (i.e., academy, museum, gallery, mass media).

(West 94)

As West indicates the work of decolonial critics and artists is social, cultural and political. It reflects an understanding of a history of subjection to disempowering constructs such as racism, colonialism, imperialism or classism and the cultural and artistic transformations required to undo the effects of such disempowering social facts. The writing of Shirin Ebadi, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam all represent forms of this ‘new cultural politics of difference’ as each critic/artist responds to and reacts to social, political and artistic articulations in the real and textual world to then bring in new enunciations that reflect an ‘expansion of freedom, democracy and individuality,’ as West suggests above.

Unlike the work of Shirin Ebadi, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not a text that reflects an 'expansion of freedom, democracy and individuality' for despite its cursory preoccupation with freedom, democracy and individuality, in its neo-Orientalist feminist guise with its negative reading of all things Iranian and Muslim, forfeits both its feminist and liberatory emphasis by reverting to (neo)colonial and imperial formations. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is an example of a text which takes its critique of Iranian society to absurd extremes which (unfortunately) when read in the US and the West, in general, is taken for an accurate representation of the Iranian social, political and academic milieu rather than to a large extent a seemingly deliberate maligning of most cultural formations in Iran during the post-revolutionary years and into the 1990s.

In this essay I have borrowed from the working group modernity/coloniality/decoloniality *Decolonial Aesthetics I* manifesto²⁵ key ideas that I would like to introduce as formulating a decolonial (politics and) aesthetics

- A focus on creativity from/in the Non-Western world and its political consequences which are independent thoughts and decolonial freedoms in all aspects of life.²⁶
- An awareness of the confinement that Euro-centered concepts of arts and aesthetics have imposed
- Sensitivity to artistic forms and practices that re-inscribe colonial/imperial formation²⁷
- A delinking from all talks and beliefs of universalism²⁸, new or old, and in so doing promoting a pluriversalism²⁹ that rejects all claims to truth without quotation marks

²⁵ The key issues that form a decolonial aesthetics are expressed in greater detail in the excerpt from the working group modernity/ coloniality/decoloniality which is available online.

²⁶ "So far, the history of the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system has privileged the culture, knowledge, and epistemology produced by the West (Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2000). No culture in the world remained untouched by European modernity. There is no absolute outside to this system. The monologism and monotopic global design of the West relates to other cultures and peoples from a position of superiority and is deaf toward the cosmologies and epistemologies of the non-Western world." (Grosfoguel *TBG*)

²⁷ This third point while not explicitly stated in either the working group modernity/coloniality/decoloniality *Decolonial Aesthetics I* manifesto or West's "New Cultural Politics of Difference" is implied by both.

²⁸ "[To] break with the uni-versalism where one ("uni") defines for the rest, in this case, the one [universal] is [the epistemology] of Western man..." (Grosfoguel, *SKWU* 89)

²⁹ [P]luriversali[sm] : a departure from universalist narratives of modernity; a real 'democracy of cultures' (R Confiant), i.e., Bantu, Buddhist, European, Islamic, Latin American, Taoist, Vedic civilization, etc. (Dussel *TI*)

Finally, the manifesto on *Decolonial Aesthetics I* reiterates the goal of decolonial thinking and doing as a way to:

continue re-inscribing, embodying and dignifying those ways of living, thinking and sensing that were violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial and interventionist agendas as well as by postmodern and altermodern internal critiques.³⁰

³⁰ "Modernity [unlike modernity/coloniality], postmodernity and altermodernity have their historical grounding in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution." (Mignolo, *GSK* 273). "Postmodernism [for example] as an epistemological project still reproduces a particular form of coloniality. A decolonial perspective requires a broader canon of thought that would require taking seriously the epistemic insights of critical thinkers from the global South." (Grosfoguel *TBG*)

2. Spectres of Orientalism: Reading *Lolita* in Tehran

2.1 “We must for dear life make our own counter-realities”- Henry James³¹: Creating ‘A Space’³² of Their Own

I do not consider myself Western, but rather modern.

—Azar Nafisi

There is nothing political in American literature.

—Laura Bush³³

It cannot be coincidental that the memoirs by Iranian female authors now living in the West, such as those of Firoozeh Dumas, Marjane Satrapi and Azar Nafisi, have found such phenomenal commercial success at a time when Washington hawks would like the authors’ country of birth to be the next battleground in the total war of the twenty-first century.

(Mottahedeh)

On the one hand, *RLT* critiqued totalitarianism and endorsed the transformative and liberating power of literature. It celebrated Fitzgerald, Austen, and James, whom so many Iranians had enjoyed -- and still were enjoying -- in Persian translation. But there were things in the book that **shocked anyone who kept close ties with Iran, even the critics of the current regime**. The teaching of Western literary works to Iranian students was presented as a groundbreaking act or something on the order of taming the savages.

(Keshavarz 19)[emphasis added]

It is not clear why a perfectly legal, sex-segregated gathering of eight [Nafisi and seven of her female students] women **discussing Western novels that were taught in Iranian universities at the time as well as before and after that time had to be held in secret**. Nafisi’s private class, which met regularly every Thursday from 1995 to 1997 and had no run-ins with authorities during these two years, is nonetheless characterized as “underground” and “clandestine.”

(Milani)[emphasis added]

³¹ Henry James, Letter to Lucy Clifford. qtd. in Nafisi, *Lolita* 216.

³² Akin to Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One’s Own.’

³³ Qtd in John Carlos Rowe “Reading Reading *Lolita* in Tehran in Idaho.”

"Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe, I said to Bijan³⁴ that evening after the Thursday class."³⁵ (Nafisi, *Lolita* 329³⁶) So begins the searing, startling and as will be shown, rather telling first sentence of the 22nd chapter of the fourth and final section of Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. A *New York Times* bestseller for over one hundred and seventeen weeks, translated into thirty-two languages, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was published in the United States in 2003 by Random House to much acclaim.³⁷

"For dear life," as Henry James once wrote, Azar Nafisi, a University Professor living in Tehran and seven³⁸ of her best female students meet privately "secretly"³⁹ each week at her home to discuss works of fiction to create "counter-realities" to the now cleric-controlled University⁴⁰ and life under the theocratic Iranian regime. For two years beginning in the autumn of 1995, every Thursday morning, Nafisi and her students (her "girls" as she refers to them) gather in her living room overlooking the picturesque Alboraz mountains to read works of fiction by Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Jane Austen. In a mix of memoir, autobiography, biography and literary criticism, Nafisi relates the story of her workshop and her life and teaching in Tehran⁴¹ before she emigrates to the United States in 1997. An engaging and well-crafted blend of genres, literary discourse and even political exposé⁴², the memoir has been much criticised for its neo-Orientalist stance.

At its most startling and most jarring to the cosmopolitan reader is the memoir's predisposition to glorify all things Western and alternately to show disdain, disgust and

³⁴ Bijan is the husband of the narrator, the memoirist Azar Nafisi.

³⁵ Abu-Lughod has referred to the "surprisingly pornographic nature of these memoirs." (See below)

³⁶ *Reading Lolita in Tehran* will henceforth be referred to as *Lolita*.

³⁷ Winner of the 2004 Non-fiction Book of the Year Award from Book Sense, Winner of the Frederic W. Ness Book Award, Winner of the 2004 Latifeh Yarsheter Book Award, Finalist for the 2004 PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Memoir

³⁸ Sometimes eight; The eighth student is male.

³⁹ As Ali Behdad explains: "This book...deals with the author's experience of teaching the Western novelistic canon (described quite inaccurately as "forbidden works of Western literature" by the publisher on the cover)" (Behdad 296) As Fatemeh Keshavarz confirms: "The uninformed reader is hence encouraged to assume that reading Western literature is forbidden in postrevolutionary Iran, an act so risky it could endanger the reader's life." (Keshavarz 112)

⁴⁰ Nafisi explains: "Teaching in the Islamic Republic, like any other vocation, was subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules. Always, the joy of teaching was marred by diversions and considerations forced on us by the regime - ..." (*Lolita* 10)

⁴¹ The memoir also refers to Nafisi's student years in the U.S., hence it can be said to cover the period between the late 1970's and the late 1990's.

⁴² See *Words not Swords* by Farzaneh Milani.

disapprobation of all things Iranian and Muslim. As Saba Mahmood⁴³, one of the many critics of Nafisi's memoir and this 'genre of writing'⁴⁴ explains:

The contempt that Nafisi reserves for Iranians and Muslims stands in sharp contrast to the utter adulation she reserves for the West: from its cultural accomplishments to its food, its language, its literature, its chocolates and its films. ... [T]his dual theme of abhorrence for everything Muslim and sheer exultation of all things Western is a structural feature of this genre of writing.
(92)

Fatemeh Keshavarz in her own memoir *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* written in response to and in protest of Nafisi's memoir echoes Mahmood's view:

... *RLT's* oversimplified world ... posits good on the side of the West and evil squarely in the Muslim camp. The book's villains are often reduced to the basic essence of their primitive otherness: a blind adherence to their faith, hatred for progress (exemplified by the West), and the oppression of women. ... In the currently fragmented relations between East and West, such exaggerated and simplistic portrayals are dangerous.

(Keshavarz 112)

Nafisi's effusive regard for and identification with all things Western (and American in particular) is evident throughout the text, as will be shown below. Nafisi has fallen victim to the well-known Iranian trope of *gharbzadegi*⁴⁵ ("Westoxication" or more literally "Weststruckness") and its corresponding repudiation of the Persian and Islamic ethos to such an extent that, at her most benign, she has "shocked anyone who kept close ties with Iran, even the critics of the current regime," as Fatemeh Keshavarz⁴⁶ has explained in the excerpt from *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, above.

Hamid Dabashi⁴⁷ has suggested that memoirs such as Nafisi's perform a far more malefic task in the service of an American imperial agenda:

⁴³ Saba Mahmood teaches at UC Berkeley. See <http://anthropology.berkeley.edu/users/saba-mahmood>.

⁴⁴ Mahmood writes: "[S]uch spokeswomen [as Nafisi] perform an unofficial but now essential role within the national political culture. They authenticate and legitimate the Islamophobia sweeping Europe [and America] today, lending a voice of credibility to some of the worst kinds of prejudices and stereotypes Europe has seen since the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930s. ... It is no small task that these female "critics of Islam" perform, and indeed, their service is recognized by the conservative political forces of contemporary Europe and America who have bestowed considerable honors on this group." (85, 87)

⁴⁵ "In the 1960s, Jalal Al-e Ahmed coined a Persian neologism – *gharbzadegi* – loosely translated as 'westoxication' – as a term of opprobrium directed against the pro-West fashion." (Nash 57)

⁴⁶ Fatemeh Keshavarz teaches at the University of Maryland. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatemeh_Keshavarz

⁴⁷ Hamid Dabashi teaches at Columbia University. See <http://www.hamiddabashi.com/teaching/>.

Let us consider the case of Azar Nafisi and her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* ..., a titillating tale of a Persian harem with the women waiting for the US marines⁴⁸ to rescue them from their own menfolk. The conceptual category that best comprehends the services that Nafisi and others like her have provided the US imperial project under George W. Bush's administration is the notion of the "native informer", a potent component of neoconservative ideology ...

... By proposing Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as the necessary emotive addendum to Fukuyama and Huntington/Lewis's⁴⁹ dual thesis of civilizational conflict, I wish to investigate the way grand strategies of domination become operational through the compradorial function of the native informers.

(*Brown Skins* 12-13)

... Either way these comprador intellectuals have been given unprecedented forums by the North American and Western European media in which to paint a picture of Muslim societies that tallies perfectly with what the needs of US propaganda are, thereby justifying the country's post-9/11 imperial projects.

(*Brown Skins* 35)

While Dabashi is perhaps the most vocal critic of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* many other Iranian critics such as Negar Mottahedeh and Ali Behdad⁵⁰ have joined him in condemning in the harshest terms Nafisi's role as a native informant "confirming the Orientalist perception of the Middle East" and writing in the service of an American imperial agenda:

As a diasporic Iranian, Nafisi thus acts as a native informant confirming the Orientalist perception of the Middle East through a narrative **that not only overlooks the rich literary tradition of Iran but also obscures the complex political and cultural history of the country**. Perhaps, even more dangerously in the post-9/11 era, the task of such comprador native intellectuals as Nafisi is "to feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge and thus to inform the US public of the atrocities that are taking place throughout the world, in the region of their native birth in particular, **by way of**

⁴⁸ John Carlos Rowe places Dabashi's critique in a wider perspective: "In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Richard Byrne describes the controversy surrounding Hamid Dabashi's article criticizing Nafisi as a forerunner of U.S. plans to invade Iran. Byrne cites several scholars, who, like Karimi-Hakkak of Maryland's Center for Persian Studies, insist that Dabashi's criticism of Nafisi is too "shrill," **especially in the claim that Nafisi's literary criticism somehow prophesies "war"**... My own approach was developed well before the controversy surrounding Dabashi's article in "the Egyptian-language newspaper *Al-Ahram*" appeared ..., and I will ...work out the scholarly and historical terms that are often lacking in Dabashi's more strictly political analysis. Nevertheless, even as I wish to distinguish my approach from Dabashi's, I want to agree at the outset with his conclusions. Although I do not think that there is a direct relationship between Nafisi's work and U.S. plans for military action in Iran, I do think Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* **represents the larger effort of neoconservatives to build the cultural and political case against diplomatic negotiations with the present government of Iran**. Nafisi also brings together micropolitical academic issues, such as the "new" aesthetics, and macropolitical questions, such as the role of the United States in contemporary world affairs."(346)[emphasis added]

⁴⁹ Dabashi is referring to Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clash_of_Civilizations.

⁵⁰ Ali Behdad teaches at UC Los Angeles. See <http://www.english.ucla.edu/all-faculty/173-behdad-ali>.

justifying the imperial designs of the US as liberating these nations from the evil of their own designs,” as Hamid Dabashi has recently argued.

(Behdad 296)[emphasis added]

Negar Mottahedeh⁵¹ confirms Dabashi's and Behdad's views:

In the era of total war⁵² intent on the reversal of cultural trends through external force, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a representation of the state of current affairs is an undiscriminating gesture. It performs like a wound-up metal monkey on wheels as the warmup act for more theater of unprovoked war and another occupation.

(Mottahedeh)

Despite the scathing criticism heaped on Nafisi and her memoir by selected⁵³ Iranian and American critics alike, there is a great deal in the memoir that is learned and intellectual and seemingly unproblematic (reflective of a somewhat outdated mode of literary reading, perhaps), however the memoir's very title⁵⁴, book cover and (pointedly) contemptuous and derisive outlook are indeed greatly problematic from an Orientalist standpoint. Lila Abu-Lughod⁵⁵ echoes Dabashi's critique that Nafisi "confirms the absence of rights for Muslim women in Iran by glorifying" Western classics and "denigrating local customs and traditions":

... [M]y analysis resembles [Hamid] Dabashi's critique of Azar Nafisi's more literate memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Dabashi focuses on the role of the "native" who confirms the absence of rights for Muslim women in Iran by glorifying classics of Western literature, denigrating local customs and traditions. He shows how the cover photograph was cropped to elide its original context (active, politically engaged women students reading about the elections in a local newspaper) and to suggest instead veiled women secretly reading Western erotic classics.

But my analysis of the surprisingly pornographic nature of these memoirs

⁵¹ Negar Mottahedeh teaches at Duke University. See <http://literature.duke.edu/people?subpage=profile&Gurl=%2Faas%2FLiterature&Uil=negar>

⁵² In "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War" Mottahedeh explains the concept of total war: "[A] war "that not only destroys the enemy's military forces, but also brings the enemy society to an extremely personal point of decision, so that they are willing to accept a reversal of the cultural trends that spawned the war in the first place." While a total war strategy does not have to "include the intentional targeting of civilians," sparing them "cannot be its first priority. **The purpose of total war is to permanently force your will onto another people.**" The purpose of the total war that is the US-led "war on terror" is to force "the grid" onto a culture that is, at its best and at its worst, ambivalent to it." [emphasis added]

⁵³ *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has received much praise and adulation from the mainstream American press, as will be discussed below. However, I hope to be able to show in this essay, the many ways in which Nafisi is writing for an American audience in a politically motivated manner which is allied with the agenda of American neoconservatism.

⁵⁴ As reviewer Heather Hewitt marvels: "Incredibly, "Lolita," the controversial novel that has so often been branded as illicit and dirty, resonated more than any other work of fiction with this group of women."

⁵⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod teaches at Columbia University. See <http://anthropology.columbia.edu/people/profile/347>.

suggests that their most substantial and important effects are the ways they cathect readers, especially Western women, to a fragile emotional truth.
(Abu-Lughod 106, 107)

The picture selected by Azar Nafisi and her Random House publishers as the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has brought much criticism to bear on Nafisi (and on her publishers) for removing the context from a well-known press photo and cropping it to serve the purposes of Nafisi's text. The cover picture in question, depicts two young women, partially veiled, focusing intently, reading intently from what appears to be a printed document. In fact, the actual press photo is not of two young women reading fiction at all, Nabokov's *Lolita* or otherwise, as the title and cover might infer, but rather as Hamid Dabashi explains in "Native informers and the Making of the American Empire" a 2000 press photo taken on a university campus, in which the young women's interest is absorbed by the results of parliamentary elections published in the leading reformist daily:

In fact the case of this cover provides an intriguing twist on Roland Barthes' binary opposition between the denoted and connoted messages of a photograph and its caption. The twist rests on the fact that the picture of these two teenagers on the cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is in fact lifted from an entirely different context. The original picture from which this cover is excised is lifted off a news report during the parliamentary election of February 2000 in Iran. In the original picture, the two young women are in fact reading the leading reformist newspaper *Mosharekat*.⁵⁶ Azar Nafisi and her publisher may have thought that the world is not looking, and that they can distort the history of a people any way they wish. But the original picture from which this cover steals its idea speaks to the fact of this falsehood.

The cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is an iconic burglary from the press, distorted and staged in a frame for an entirely different purpose than when it was taken. In its distorted form and framing, the picture is cropped so we no longer see the newspaper that the two young female students are holding in their hands, thus creating the illusion that they are "Reading Lolita"--with the scarves of the two teenagers doing the task of "in Tehran." In the original picture the two young students are obviously on a college campus, reading a newspaper that is reporting the latest results of a major parliamentary election in their country. Cropping the newspaper, their classmates behind them, and a perfectly visible photograph of President Khatami--the iconic representation of the reformist movement--out of the picture and suggesting that the two young women are reading "Lolita" strips them of their moral intelligence and their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland, ushering them into a colonial harem.

(2006)

⁵⁶ Mosharekat (Persian: مشارکت) was a former pro-reform newspaper of the Islamic Iran Participation Front which was one of 13 reformist newspapers banned in Iran in April, 2000. (Wikipedia)

Let us for a moment, return to the rather off-colour comment quoted above in which Nafisi describes life in the Islamic Republic as “having sex with a man you loathe” (Nafisi, *Lolita* 329) and contrast it with another passage in which Nafisi discusses the fate of the soul under totalitarian regimes:

Once evil is individualized, becoming part of everyday life, the way of resisting it also becomes individual. **How does the soul survive? is the essential question.** And the response is: **through love and imagination.** Stalin emptied Russia of its soul by pouring on the old death. Mandelstam and Sinyavsky restored that soul by reciting poetry to fellow convicts and by writing about it in their journals. **“Perhaps to remain a poet in such circumstances,”** Bellow wrote, **“is also to reach the heart of politics. The human feelings, human experiences, the human form and face, recover their proper place—the foreground.”**

(Nafisi, *Lolita* 315)[emphasis added]

Lyrical and powerful, Nafisi writes with passion and emotion when discussing political dissidence in the West, reserving her least inimitable writing for images of Islam and the Iranian regime and life under it. As the passage below indicates, devoid not only of “human form and face”, life under the Ayatollahs, is described in not only as ‘having sex with a man you loath’ but in equally jarring somatic, sexual terms, this time, as form of molestation:

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. ... I couldn’t get rid of this idea of sexual molestation. ... As for your most eloquent analogy, your girls must resent the fact that while you’re leaving this guy behind⁵⁷, they have to keep sleeping with him—some of them, at least, he said ... Going away isn’t going to help as much as you think. The memory stays with you, and the stain. It’s not something you slough off once you leave.

(Nafisi, *Lolita* 329, 330)

Finally to contrast once again the difference in tone, approach and characterization between the *loathsome* Iranian (government/people/culture) and the works and texts and philosophies of the *unparalleled* literary West:

Only later did I come to realize how the values shaping that novel [*The Great Gatsby*] were the exact opposite of those of the revolution. Ironically, as time went by, it was the values inherent in *Gatsby* that would triumph but at the time we had not yet realized just how far we had betrayed our dreams.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ That is, leaving the country, leaving Iran.

⁵⁸ Nafisi is referring to the aftermath and consequences of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 after which she feels Iranians had ‘betrayed their dreams.’

... I could not articulate in words the thoughts and emotions that made me so excited about *Gatsby*. I kept going back to Fitzgerald's own explanation of the novel: "That's the whole burden of this novel," he had said, "the loss of the illusions that give such color to the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory." I wanted to tell them that this book was not about adultery but about the loss of dreams. For me it had become of vital importance that my students accept *Gatsby* on its own terms, celebrate and love it because of its amazing and anguished beauty

...

(Nafisi, *Lolita* 108 and 133)

Finally like Nabokov's "poet/criminal" Humbert, Nafisi cleverly, mischievously, almost sulphurously creates "a sense of empathy and complicity with the reader" (*Lolita* 41) echoing Humbert's iconic plea from the 1955 *Lolita*, in order to acquaint the reader to with her private "secret"⁵⁹ workshop:

But to steal the words from Humbert, the poet/criminal of *Lolita*, **I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't.** Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinary ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. **And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us.**⁶⁰

... This, then, is the story of *Lolita* in Tehran, how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*.

(Nafisi, *Lolita* 6)[emphasis added]

⁵⁹ Which as mentioned by Milani, Behdad and Keshavarz above, need not be secret, since it neither forbidden for eight women to meet privately *nor* is it forbidden to read Western classics, which were taught coterminously at the local Universities.

⁶⁰ Nafisi creates her private reading group in order to restore the sense of freedom and individuality which she feels the Islamic Republic has robbed her and her students of: '[F]or dear life mak[ing] [their] ... own counter-realities' to quote Henry James once more.

2.2 An American Success Story

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) is an American success story.⁶¹ A 350-page memoir on life in Iran under a theocratic Islamic regime between 1979 and 1997, it was published a year and a half after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as the United States was going to war against Iraq.⁶² It quickly catapulted to the number one paperback best seller position on the *New York Times Book Review* list, where it remained for a year and a half. By April 2004 it ranked second on the list of most-read books on college campuses (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 2004, A8). By September 2004 it was the fifth-most-borrowed nonfiction book in U.S. libraries (*Library Journal* 2004, 96). *Reading Lolita* has been translated into Spanish and French. As of February 2004 it was in its fifteenth printing and was being translated into ten other languages (Birnbaum 2004), including Chinese and Hebrew. And perhaps inevitably, by March 2005 "movie rights ha[d] been optioned" (Memmott 2005, ID). This enthusiastic public reception has been matched by overwhelmingly positive reviews.

(Ahmed-Ghosh & Donadey 623)

... American undergraduates are learning to read their own literary tradition through the prism of Nafisi's memoir ...

(Whitlock 167)

"The relevance of literature. The relevance of art. The relevance of culture. What literature, what art, what culture, what values? For whom for what?"

(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 106)

There is little doubt that *Reading Lolita in Tehran*⁶³ is an American success story and has been widely read in the academy, the book club and via the public library. The question that has captivated a subset of critics is what accounts for the incredible éclat for a memoir from a little known writer such as John Hopkins University Professor Azar Nafisi. Even more significantly they have questioned why a memoir focussed on the

⁶¹ "[F]estooned with testimonials from Susan Sontag, Margaret Atwood, and the *New York Times*'s Michiko Kakutani; widely praised for its lyrical and evocative style; ingeniously marketed to American middle-class women eager to identify a redeeming social benefit in joining a book group." (Ahmad 118-119)

⁶² ... [C]omprador intellectuals have been given unprecedented forums by the North American and Western European media in which to paint a picture of Muslim societies that tallies perfectly with what the needs of US propaganda are, thereby justifying the country's post-9/11 imperial projects. (Dabashi, *Brown Skins* 35)

⁶³ Nafisi has also written an autobiographical memoir titled *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memoirs of a Prodigal Daughter* (Random House 2008) which has met with very little enthusiasm from readers as the paucity of reviews attests. (There is therefore, a special interest which *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has been able to attract and maintain since its publication in 2003 as a million-copy bestseller.) Nafisi's most recent book *The Republic of Imagination: A Case for Fiction* (Random House 2014) "a series of linked essays that explores the U.S. through its literature" which has received early positive reviews. (See Laura Miller's "Why this Iranian-born writer fears for America's soul.")

transformative power of fiction “should be so popular in a culture that supposedly discourages serious reading” (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 623 quoting Trudy Bush).

Gillian Whitlock⁶⁴ in *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* suggests that the success of Nafisi’s multi-genre memoir in the US can be attributed to: the “wave of enthusiasm for reading as mass entertainment”, the institutionalization of the book club, the reference to canonical works in Nafisi’s text, the “Tehran connection”, as well as the popularity of the phenomenon Jim Collins has called “high-pop.”⁶⁵

Reading Lolita has been carried on the wave of enthusiasm for reading as mass entertainment, which has been sponsored by Oprah Winfrey, among other prominent figures in the United States. The public campaign to restore reading as a recreational and communal activity, and the emergence of the book club as an important institution in the consumption of fiction during the past decade, is a precursor of Nafisi’s appearance as a celebrity for Audi in the company of stars of football, film, and rock music ... Epitextual commentaries suggest that Nafisi’s memoir has been a book of choice for many reading clubs, and the publisher offers questions to facilitate group discussion on the Internet.⁶⁶ There are also assignments for sale at “Term Papers and Essays” (AcaDemon.com, n.d.) that **suggest American undergraduates are learning to read their own literary tradition through the prism of Nafisi’s memoir ... Nafisi’s memoir both performs and requires an immersion in canonical literature for its avid reader... *Reading “Lolita”* reflects the book group and the accomplished reader back to themselves in the most flattering terms imaginable.⁶⁷ It suggests that **reading the right books is a sign of aesthetic taste and cultivation, individual integrity and sensitivity.****

(Whitlock 166-167,169)[emphasis added]

⁶⁴ Gillian Whitlock teaches at the University of Queensland. See <http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/gillianwhitlock>.

⁶⁵ Whitlock explains: “Although the Teheran connection is vital to the contemporary cachet of the memoir, there are other considerations in accounting for this best-seller. Nafisi’s memoir is part of a phenomenon that Jim Collins (2002) describes as “high-pop.” This is produced by a merger of what were previously taken to be mutually exclusive tastes and institutions, a renegotiation of relations between capital and “cultural capital” that has led to the popularization of Jane Austen novels in television and film, for example, or the marketing of the Ernest Hemingway furniture collection (both examples particularly relevant to Nafisi’s canon of Great Authors). As Collins remarks, high art “has refused to stay put as a hothouse plant in the academy” in the recent past ... In this way, *Reading Lolita*, like the BBC, Bollywood, and Karen Jay Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004), take books that have been accorded canonical status in the academy to wider audiences, with the expectation that readerships can accumulate the skills required to enter into erudite conversation. As Collins remarks, **the ability to deliver goods that were once the stuff of elite cultural pleasures is a result of profound changes in not only delivery systems and commodification but also in the cartography of taste.**” (169-170)[emphasis added]

⁶⁶ See Turhan, Filiz. “Reading Lolita in Tehran: Teacher’s Guide.” *Random House, Academic Resources*.

⁶⁷ Whitlock sketches the charming, classy, highbrow (even ‘transgressive’) reading setting: “The milieu of the book group in *Reading “Lolita”*---the living room with its lovely vistas of the mountains surrounding the city captured in the mirror, the cream cakes and roses and good coffee, the committed and passionate teacher, and the bright young women who love to read to find in fiction “not so much reality but the epiphany of truth”(Nafisi 2003b, 3)---is a ritualistic setting for a discussion of how *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lolita* are to be consumed in highly cultured acts of transgression . ” (169)

Unlike Whitlock, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh and other critics⁶⁸ attribute *Reading Lolita in Tehran's* success largely to "political and ideological" causes. Moreover Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh highlight the fact that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* confirms and maintains US and American readers' preferences and expectations by reinforcing Western mainstream political (imperial) ideology and more importantly by "provid[ing] the kind of ideological perspective that European and American audiences have come to expect" from Muslim women's writing:

While Iranian women's memoirs have become something of a cottage industry, notably in the United States and France, *Reading Lolita* has had the most exposure of such books in the United States by far. ... We contend that **this memoir has been successful for a variety of political and ideological reasons** in addition to the current popularity of the memoir as a genre, *Reading Lolita's* literary value (manifest in the various narrative techniques used to make the past present and to maintain suspense), and its ability to elicit the reader's empathy for the characters. **In particular, *Reading Lolita* can easily lend itself to interpretations that reinforce a dominant western, especially U.S., ideology. The book provides the kind of ideological perspective that American and European audiences have come to expect, if not demand, from women in Muslim countries.**⁶⁹

(Donadey & Ahmed-Ghosh 623-24)[emphasis added]

Keshavarz echoes Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh's view that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* caters to American and Western readers' expectations with the added demonization of stock characters such as the Iranian Muslim revolutionary, thereby confirming Nafisi role as native informer/informant⁷⁰:

By and large, *RLT* satisfies mass curiosity and affirms pre-existing perceptions. Its central message to the reader, delivered by a member of the native culture, is: Meet the subhumans you always knew were there! Comparing the extremist student [Mr.] Nahvi⁷¹ to Elizabeth Bennet, *RLT* declares, "you are as different as man and mouse"... This assertion reflects the book's central thesis that Iranian Muslim revolutionaries are subhuman. They cannot understand anything other than brute force and do not deserve anything but our "eternal contempt."

(Keshavarz 112)[emphasis added]

⁶⁸ Dabashi, Milani, Keshavarz, Behdad, Mahmood and Abu-Lughod, for example.

⁶⁹ A detailed discussion on Western expectations of Muslim women's writing in Nafisi's memoir can be found in "Misleading a Misinformed Public: Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" below.

⁷⁰ Dabashi's „Native informer“ (2006) and Spivak's „Native informant“ (1999)

⁷¹ The name Nahvi, as Keshavarz explains, is not chosen at random and means "Arabic grammarian." (Keshavarz 114) (Nafisi is not a fan of the Arabic language, see *Lolita* 48) Nafisi describes Mr. Nahvi in the following manner: "Mr. Nahvi, with his dusty suit, buttoned-up shirt, layered hair and squishy eyes was ever once in a while resurrected as an easy target of our jokes. He earned my eternal contempt the day he announced that the protagonist in Gorky's *Mother* was a far finer specimen of womanhood than all the flighty young ladies in Jane Austen's novels." (Nafisi, *Lolita* 288)

A diasporic memoir, written in English, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is meant for Western consumption and has in fact received little attention from among the Persian readership. As of 2004 *Reading Lolita in Tehran* had not been translated into Persian and had received little attention from readers in Iran, reading in English or Farsi.⁷² This lack of interest in the memoir may have to do with the fact that the memoir is now dated for Nafisi had portrayed a particularly trying time period in Iran's post-revolutionary development which has now passed.⁷³ Alternately it is the memoir's refraction of life in Iran through a Western Orientalist prism which has altered it to such an extent as to make it unrecognizable to Iranian readers. As one particularly insightful Tehrani reader of the memoir was quoted in Karl Vicks' creatively titled *Washington Post* article, "Sorry, Wrong Chador In Tehran, 'Reading Lolita' Translates as Ancient History, has stated: the book "is brilliant" "but it has nothing to do with Iran."

"The idea of the book is so brilliant," said one Tehran resident, who wished to remain unnamed so she could speak candidly about a system that still can cause problems for people who speak openly. "The intermingling of literary criticism and politics is brilliant. The style of writing is brilliant. I mean, it's a brilliant book.

"But it has nothing to do with Iran."

(Vick)

Gillian Whitlock like Vick differentiates between the reception of Iranian diasporic memoirs in Iran and the US:

[Such] memoirs⁷⁴ appear at one and the same time as unfamiliar and belated to contemporary Iranians, and familiar and welcome to contemporary American readers—a conjunction that signals their entanglement in complicated and mutable lines of filiation, connection and commodification.

(Whitlock 165)

⁷² "Azar Nafisi's memoir of life and book groups after the Iranian revolution may be a huge bestseller in the United States, but it has yet to be translated into Persian. As a result, almost no Iranians have even heard of the book. Fewer still have read it." (Vick)

⁷³ "Nafisi... left the Islamic Republic of Iran just as Khatami swept onto it. The election of the gentle, bespectacled cleric (a librarian himself) **augured a fundamental change in the atmosphere of the world's only theocracy**. In the end, Khatami failed to change the structure of Iran's government, which today remains dominated by clerics who answer only to themselves. But his election, and the landslides that followed for reformists, **represented titanic public rejection of the suffocation Nafisi made so vivid** in "Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books." (Vick)[emphasis added]

⁷⁴ Whitlock is referring here to memoirs such as Marjane Satrapi's graphic-novel *Persepolis* and Roya Hakakian's semi-autobiographical *Journey from the Land of No*.

2.3 Quintessentially Iranian: A Vibrant Literary Culture

A subversive pleasure in reading (forbidden) books has always been definitive to my generation of Iranians ...

(Dabashi, *Iran* 106)

Of the most egregious distortions in Nafisi's memoir, one that has enraged Persian sensibilities is her extremely misleading pronouncement that Iranian culture "denied any merit to literary works."⁷⁵ In her words:

We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something more urgent—namely ideology.

(Nafisi, *Lolita* 25)

Fatemeh Keshavarz has taken great umbrage to Nafisi's comment and counters in *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* with the following riposte:

I had lived, studied, and worked on three continents, and if there was a culture in which people expressed their enthusiasm for literature more publicly than in Iran, I could not think of one. It would be difficult to live in Iran and not to see this enthusiasm was not limited to the educated elite either. How many a baker, shopkeeper, or taxi driver had I heard whispering Omar Khayyam under his breath. **Now this book, which meant to celebrate the power of literature,**

⁷⁵ Ahmad attempts to provide context for Nafisi's controversial comment and argues that Nafisi does in fact show regard for Persian poetry in her memoir. While Ahmad's point is well taken, as she herself admits the texts chosen by Nafisi for her 'underground' reading class are mainly Western. Nafisi does not make the effort to distinguish between the attitude of the general populous toward literature and uses the attitude of the theocratic government which denies "merit to literary works" to stand in for the culture at large.

"In a scathing attack that made the pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Boston Globe*, Hamid Dabashi characterized *Reading Lolita* as "partially responsible for cultivating the U.S. (and by extension the global) public opinion against Iran." A large part of Dabashi's critique centers on Nafisi's exclusive choice of Western classics as a worthy object of study for her underground book group. To be fair, Nafisi frequently mentions Persian poetry as a subversive force banned by a government loathe to admit any non-Muslim cultural influence. For her, banned Persian poets provide just as valuable a window into freedom and human expression as James and Austen. Before beginning the reading group on which her memoir centers, Nafisi belonged to a study group for classical Persian literature. Every Sunday night, "like a group of conspirators, we would gather around the dining room table and read poetry and prose from Rumi, Hafez, Sa'adi, Khayyam, Nezami, Ferdowsi, Attar, Beyhaghi. We would take turns reading passages aloud, and words literally rose up in the air and descended upon us like a fine mist, touching all five senses. There was such a teasing, playful quality to their words, such joy in the power of language to delight and astonish." The characterization defies the stark dichotomy presented by the book's title and packaging; but such an indigenous literary tradition plays nearly no role compared with the English and American [and Russian] classics that structure Nafisi's memoir. The first item on her alternative curriculum is *A Thousand and One Nights*, used as a case study in subversive storytelling. Yet Scheherazade's protofeminist legend merits no chapter in Nafisi's book, unlike Jane Austen, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Vladimir Nabokov." (Ahmad 119-120)

denied and erased this most prevalent cultural behaviour in a society I knew so well.

(Keshavarz 19)[emphasis added]

Farzaneh Milani too counters Nafisi's misrepresentation of the centrality of literature to Iranian life by righting the record and highlighting the absence of Persian writers in Nafisi's text:

[S]he ignores the literature of resistance that flourished in Iran during the period covered by her book. **The fact remains that in spite of all hindrances or perhaps because of them, Iran can claim to be one of the most vibrant literary cultures⁷⁶ in the Middle East today. Iranian writers are silenced on these pages in a way that has eluded the Iranian authorities.**

(Milani)[emphasis added]

Hamid Dabashi traces the centuries long familiarity of Iranian readers with world literature by linking events in the political world with works from the literary world:

Great works of literature from around the world have long graced and enriched Iranian literary and political culture. The French Revolution of 1789 occasioned the exposure of Iranians to French and English literatures. The European revolutions of 1848 deeply appealed to expatriate Iranian intellectuals in Istanbul, a development that resulted in more translations from French and English. The Russian Revolution of 1917 did the same with Russian literature. The US occupation of Iran during World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights movement brought exposure to American literature. The Latin American revolutions, the African anti-colonial movements, Indian anti-colonial nationalism, the Chinese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, the student uprising in France—all are additional landmarks of Iranian exposures to world literature. There has also been plentiful exposure to modern Arabic literature in the aftermath of the European colonial occupation of Palestine and Nasserite nationalism.

(Dabashi, *Brown Skin* 76)

Furthermore, Dabashi lineates Nafisi's obfuscation of Persian literary culture by emphasising the centrality of poetry to Iranian culture:

Iranians take poetry quite seriously—a habit that tends to lend a certain poetic diction to our historical recollections, the way we remember ourselves. If Jazz is the cadence of American culture ... **then Persian poetry is the pulse of Iranian culture, the rhyme and rhythm of its collective memory.** It is said that what Muslims do is not memorize the Qur'an but Qur'anify their memory. If that is what Muslims do, then that must be what Iranians do too with their poetry, when they remember their past as the poetic resonance of their present—in fact, of their presence in history.

(Dabashi, *Iran* 13)[emphasis added]

⁷⁶ In *Iran Interrupted*, Hamid Dabashi writes: "My mother could not read or write a word. But she knew more lines of Persian poetry (of Omar Khayyam and Baba Taher Uryan in particular) by heart and recited them appropriately and on the right occasion, with impeccable prosody and elocution, than all my high school teachers put together." (Dabashi, *Iran* 143)

And finally, Dabashi shows that both the banning and the pleasure in reading “forbidden” books has been part of Iranian culture since the times of the Shah:

A subversive pleasure in reading (forbidden) books has always been definitive to my generation of Iranians ...

(Dabashi, *Iran* 106)

[A] list of books...prepared by the shah's secret police, the dreaded SAVAK ... and distributed to bookstores across the country. No books on that list were to be sold, or even found, in any bookstore. That list became my core curriculum, as it were, the map of my liberal education into a defiant politics, for the next four years. To this day, I first remember the Persian titles of the non-Persian books on that page: Jack London's *Ava-ye Vahsh* (*The Call of the Wild*), Ethel Lillian Voynich's *Kharmagas* (*Gadfly*), John Steinbeck's *Khuseh-ha-ye-Khashan* (*The Grapes of Wrath*), Bertold Brecht's *Naneh Delavar* (*Mother Courage*) and *Deere-ye Gachi Qafqazi* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*), Emile Zola's *Zherminaal* (*Germinal*), Ignazio Silone's *Nan-o-Sharb* (*Bread and Wine*), Maxim Gorky's *Daneshkadeh-ha-ye Man* (*My Universities*), Stendahl's *Sokh-o-Siah* (*The Red and the Black*), Pearl Buck's *Khak-e Khub* (*The Good Earth*), Shakespeare's *Haamlet* (*Hamlet*). ...

(Dabashi, *Iran* 105-6)

Nafisi's so-called “clandestine” workshop need not have been described as such, as it was perfectly legal for eight women to meet to discuss work of literature concurrently taught at the Universities in Iran as Milani and Behdad and Keshavarz have explained. And as Dabashi has disclosed, ‘a generation of his compatriots have shared in the pleasure of “reading (forbidden) books.” Much of the hullabaloo which Nafisi and her publishers have created around *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is hype meant to entice Western readers to the *furtive* and *forbidden* nature of the reading workshop In Tehran which Nafisi created during her absence from University teaching. With undue exaggeration Nafisi explains:

There was something, both in [Nabokov's] ... fiction and in his life, that we instinctively related to and grasped, the possibility of a boundless freedom **when all options are taken away**. I think that was what drove me to create the class. My main link with the outside world had been the university, and now that I had severed that link, there on the brink of the void, I could invent the violin or be devoured by the void.

(Nafisi. *Lolita* 25)[emphasis added]

The reference to the violin and the void is Nabokovian as Nafisi had cited earlier in the text:

In his foreword to the English edition of *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959), Nabokov reminds the reader that his novel does not offer “*tous pour tous*.” Nothing of the kind. “It is,” he claims, “a violin in the void.”

(Nafisi, *Lolita* 22)

In a vibrant literary cultural such as that in Iran much world literature is read in translation (unlike, it must be said, Nafisi’s students in her private workshop or at the University who read works in the original.) Keshavarz and Dabashi point to the important and healthy tradition of translation in Iran which has served to introduce Western (and international) works to the Persian reading public “long before *Reading Lolita in Tehran*” was even written:

Iranian readers are so interested in world literature that good translators can become almost as famous as authors themselves. Najaf Daryabandari, Mohammad Ghazi, Hasan Shahbaz, Simin Danishvar, and Jalal AleAhmad (the last two prominent writers themselves) are only a few of the better-known names. James, Austen, Fitzgerald, Maupassant, Steinbeck, Camus, Faulkner, Brecht, and many others became familiar names among Iranian readers long before *RLT* was written.

(Keshavarz 126)

Dabashi illustrates the *international* nature of Persian reading habits:

“Masterpieces of Russian, European, and American literature were translated and widely read in Iran as if they were part of Persian Literature and without the slightest attention paid to a categorical inanity called “Western Literature,” which for generations of Iranian literati meant absolutely nothing. To this day, I cannot tell if Dostoyevsky and Steinbeck—two writers closest to the heart, and confident companions of the darkest and happiest days of my generation of Iranians—are Western, Eastern, Northern, Southern, or lived in igloos in Alaska. One was Russian and the other was American, and they carried their respective universes within their visions—which had no conception of where this “West” was. I, along with generations of other Iranians, read them in translation (by exceedingly competent translators ...) as if they were written originally in Persian. The poetry we read was no less wide-ranging in its cosmopolitan embrace of an emancipated world.”

(Dabashi, *Iran* 30)

3. Shirin Ebadi's Iran Awakening From Prison to Peace Prize: One Woman's Struggle at the Crossroads of History

3.1 Memoir as Soft Weapon

... [A] positive and hopeful sign became evident for both Iran and the region when in October 2003 Shirin Ebadi became the first Iranian recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Ebadi represented generations of Iranians fighting for their inalienable rights against daunting odds. As a civil rights and human rights activist, she represented the aspirations of people in a much wider domain of denial and denigration. As a lawyer, she highlighted the absence of due process of law in the countries that were now particularly proud to celebrate her prize. As a woman, she was a symbol of resistance to generations of systematic abuse and gender apartheid in her own homeland and in the region at large. And finally, as a Muslim, she could now bear witness to the far wider spectrum of terror and tyranny perpetuated by a home-grown patriarchy as well as by imported cultural imperialism. Against the background of religious tradition in which endemic gender apartheid is definitive to the very letter of its medieval laws, Muslim women have for generations fought against a jurisprudence of misogyny and patriarchy. Ebadi represented not just other heroic Iranian women who had stood up to both domestic and foreign tyranny but also those who continued to identify and resist forces that were responsible for such continuing calamities the world over.

(Dabashi, *Iran* 209)

... [T]his old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half my life in Iran, I know this image is far from the truth...I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists. I also don't want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the wars against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or those who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten.

(Marjane Satrapi qtd. in Milani)

As Dr Johnson said, no man was better qualified to write his life than himself. The same holds true for women. The problem is that in the eighteenth century (and before) few women dared; few women were able; few women were qualified; few women had a life to write.

(Kadar 11)

The first Muslim woman and the first Iranian to win a Nobel Peace Prize (2003), Shirin Ebadi's life journey is a serious and sobering narrative of a former judge and lawyer's life and work in Iran under the forbidding theocracy which emerged in 1979. In the Epilogue to *Iran Awakening* (2006), Shirin Ebadi discusses her motive for writing her memoir:

Though words are peaceful weapons, over the past fifteen years I have been harassed, threatened and jailed in the course of defending human rights and victims of violence in Iran. I have long wanted to write a memoir of these years, told from the perspective of a woman who was sidelined by the Islamic Revolution but stayed in Iran⁷⁷ and carved out a professional and political role in the forbidding theocracy that emerged.

(Ebadi, *IA* 209-10)

Invoking words as soft weapons⁷⁸ Ebadi evokes the legendary Scheherazde to explain how women in Iranian society have often used words to empower themselves:

It reminds me of a truth I have learned in my lifetime, one that is echoed in the history of Iranian women across the ages; that the written word is the most powerful tool we have to protect ourselves, both from the tyrants of the day and from our own traditions. Whether it is the storyteller of legend Scheherazde, staving off beheading by spinning a thousand and one tales, feminist poets of the last century who challenged the culture's perception of women through verse, or lawyers like me, who defend the powerless in courts, Iranian women have for centuries relied on words to transform reality.

(Ebadi, *IA* 209)

Ebadi is a lawyer of international repute and it is illuminating that she highlights not the power of the law itself, but rather the currency in which the legal profession deals, that is, *language* as the "most powerful tool" which Iranian women have to protect themselves "both from the tyrants of the day and from our traditions."

Ebadi's lifelong work has been her attempt to meld her religious beliefs with her professional ones, to show that Islam and democracy are not only compatible but

⁷⁷ Sadly, Ebadi, who fought a life-long to remain in Iran against incredible odds is now no longer able to return to her country of birth and resides abroad for security reasons.

⁷⁸ See Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*.

In an article titled "Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women's Autobiographies," Nima Naghibi writes: "I will be using the terms "autobiography" and "memoir" interchangeably, as the contemporary abundance of nonfictional self-reflexive narratives tend to challenge the traditional generic and gendered distinctions between the two categories. " (80) I, like Naghibi, do not distinguish between autobiography and memoir.

that Islam can and does⁷⁹ champion women's rights. As she explains shortly after receiving the Nobel:

In the last twenty-three years, from the day I was stripped of my judgeship to the years doing battle in the revolutionary courts in Tehran, I had repeated one refrain: an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with equality and democracy is an authentic expression of faith.⁸⁰ It is not religion that binds women, but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered. That belief, along with the conviction that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within, has underpinned my work.

(Ebadi, *IA* 204)

Furthermore, Ebadi explains that her memoir was an opportunity for her to challenge Western stereotypes of Islam and of Muslim women as "docile, forlorn" persons. She indicates how in a changing Iran women are both better educated and have recently rejoined the work force:

Along with my own journey I wanted to illustrate how Iran was changing, for change comes to the Islamic Republic in slow and subtle ways that are easy to miss. Standing at a crowded intersection of the capital or listening to the sermon at Friday prayers, you would not immediately know that 65 percent of Iran's university students and 43 percent of its salaried workers are women. I wanted to write a book that would help correct Western stereotypes of Islam, especially the image of Muslim women as docile, forlorn creatures.

(Ebadi, *IA* 210)

Most significantly, Ebadi does not see her prize or her memoir in a predominantly personal vein, but rather as recognition of a philosophy adhered to in pursuit of a higher goal:

As the sky we flew through darkened and the bustle of the cabin settled, I began to consider the prize's real meaning. Not for a second had I thought it was meant for me as an individual. Such lofty recognition could only be intended for what someone's life symbolized, the path or approach they had followed in pursuit of some higher purpose.

(Ebadi, *IA* 204)

In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Ebadi suggested that many women in Iran and beyond would be inspired by her selection:

⁷⁹ It is unfortunately necessary to defend Islam's position on women. So much has been written which maligns Islamic law and jurisprudence without an understanding of the context of the law or its meaning.

⁸⁰ Interestingly, although Ebadi believes that Islam is compatible with democracy and human rights, she would prefer a system of separation of state from religion. As she mentions, both in her memoir (Ebadi 122) and in an interview titled *Pioneer in Peace*: "I need to emphasize that I believe in secularism. The state needs to be separate from religion so that the political authorities would not take advantage of people's religious beliefs in promoting their own agenda. In 1979 Iranian people voted for an Islamic regime but that does not mean that the regime, in guise of religion, can violate people's rights. Islam recognizes equal rights, and in many cases Iranian feminists, including myself, have drawn on Islam to promote human rights and democracy in Iran. But we still have a long way to go." (International Museum of Women)

Undoubtedly, my selection will be an inspiration to the masses of women who are striving to realize their rights, not only in Iran but throughout the region - rights taken away from them through the passage of history. This selection will make women in Iran, and much further afield, believe in themselves.

(Ebadi, *Nobel Lecture*)

3.2 The Legal/Political Background

Iran is a Muslim country which has adopted *sharia* or Islamic law code in its entirety, unlike other Muslim nations in which sharia exists alongside other normative legal systems.⁸¹ There are important differences between the way sharia is applied in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world. This difference is most likely a combination of Iran's Shia identity and its open door to *ijtihad* or interpretation. It is important therefore, for the reader of Ebadi's text to recognize that many of Iran's laws and especially their case-by-case applications are surprisingly inequitable and not representative of the Islamic world as a whole.

Prior to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran did not enforce sharia law, but in a dramatic move directly following the Revolution, sharia law in its most limiting interpretation was imposed on Iran. These new laws were especially restrictive towards women as Ebadi explains:

The grim statutes that I would spend the rest of my life fighting stared back at me from the page: the value of a woman was half that of a man (for instance, if a car hit both on the street, the cash compensation due to the woman's family was half that due to the man's); a woman's testimony in court as a witness to a crime counted only half as much as a man's; a woman had to ask her husband's permission for divorce.

(Ebadi, *IA* 51)

These new laws take their precedent from inheritance laws and then apply them unequivocally in all other instances of the law – resulting in truly problematic expressions of inequality as Ebadi's cases in the 90's show.

The changeability of Iranian law after the Revolution can be seen in laws that are completely overturned a decade or so later such as a law banning women from the practice of law in 1980 which is completely reversed in 1992. Twelve years into the Revolution, the Revolutionary Guard recognizes the need for economic progress and an active, educated work force and turns to its women as an important resource:

About two years into the postwar period, the Islamic Republic quietly changed course. Even the most militant, bearded ideologue could see where the revolution's policies—the marginalization of women, the pro-natal agenda that barred contraception—had taken the country. It was fairly clear by then that the Shia revolution would not be sweeping the region. It was clear that the Iranian

⁸¹ Since the early Islamic states of the eighth and ninth centuries, [sharia](#) always existed alongside other normative systems.^[1] Most Muslim-majority countries adopt various aspects of sharia. According to BBC, some countries adopt only a few aspects of Sharia, others apply the entire code.^[2] (Wikipedia: "Application of sharia law by country")

economy could no longer support a burgeoning population, whose growth rate had jumped to the highest in the world. Iran, the system's leaders concluded, needed to integrate into the world economy or risk devolving into a truly impoverished third world country. Privatization, a new focus on manufacturing rather than agriculture, and attracting foreign investment all became priorities for the state. There was only one hitch: Iran didn't have the knowledge and human resource base to undertake such ambitions. The Islamic Republic had wrapped women in veils and stuck them in the kitchen. Now it needed to rebuild itself after a devastating war, and it needed them back.

As part of this involuntary pragmatism, in 1992 the judiciary relented and permitted women to begin practising law. The Iranian Bar Association granted me a license, and I set up office ... and began seeing clients.

(Ebadi, /A 109-110)

During the twelve years after which she is stripped of her judgeship and until the law is overturned which allows her to serve as a lawyer, Ebadi is demoted to a court clerk a position she continues to hold until she is allowed to retire. The psychological impact, however, must have been devastating to this former young judge, one of the first women judges who, in the course of five years had become the first woman president of the Tehran City Court in 1975 ("Pioneer of Peace").

3.3 The Power of Narrative

Ebadi points to the power of narrative as the best way to illustrate to the Iranian public the “tragic repercussions” of the theocracy’s gender inequality. “A system”, Ebadi explains “whose laws needed to go on trial before they could be changed:”

I had to choose cases, I realized, that illustrated the tragic repercussions of the theocracy’s legal discrimination against women. I could recite a litany of objectionable laws—a women’s life is worth half as much as a man’s, child custody after infancy goes automatically to the father—until I was out of breath. But a personal story is more powerful than any dry summary of why a given law should be changed. To attract people’s attention, to solicit their sympathies and convince them that these laws were not simply unfair but actively pathological, I had to tell stories.

(Ebadi, *IA* 111)

Story-telling is Ebadi’s most important tool both in her legal work and via her memoir. By sharing both her personal story and her clients’ stories she manages to draw attention to all that is lacking, unjust and even pathological in the theocracy’s legal upheaval. Both Iranians and international readers of her memoir, cannot but be moved by Ebadi’s personal and professional tales which showcase extremes of injustice. Ebadi’s illustrations point to the personal and political costs of dispossession which she wishes the Iranian public in particular to comprehend. “Iranian culture”, she suggests:

[F]or all its preoccupation with shame and honor, with all its resulting patriarchal codes, retains an acute sensitivity to injustice. The revolution against the shah, after all, had premised itself on the ethos of fighting *zolm*, or oppression; it was a revolution conducted in the name of the *mustazafin*, the dispossessed. People had to see how the dispossessed had now become the dispossessors.

(Ebadi, *IA* 111)

Ebadi makes a key political point here, the significance of which must not be undermined. Via the power of narrative, Ebadi wishes to demonstrate that the so-called champions of revolution had in fact, become dangerous forces dispossessing the poor and the marginal via a legal system based on extreme gender inequality. The ruling theocracy had in the name of Islam ushered in a system of laws which were completely incompatible with justice and the spirit of Islam, as Ebadi has argued repeatedly.

Ebadi manages to bring international attention to cases of injustice in Iran, for even if the theocracy is uninterested in reforming its laws at home, “it wished with each

passing year to shed its pariah status in the global community. Slowly, it grew more aware that a nation on uneven footing with the West could not afford to trample its citizens' rights." (Ebadi, *IA* 126). Ebadi by telling Iranian's stories of legal woe particularly those of women and children becomes the international spokesperson for human rights in Iran:

It meant there was now a face and a name attached to the abstract term "human rights" in Iran, and that finally millions of women who could not articulate their frustrations and desires had someone to speak on their behalf. I would never assume such a role for myself, but in the Islamic Republic, we have a problem with representation.

(Ebadi, *IA* 127)

The memoirist becomes the representative of the many dispossessed of their rights both within Iran *and* internationally because over time lawyers and activists come to recognize that change in Iran when it will not come from within, may be brought about by pressure from outside the country. As Ebadi underscores:

Between my ever-growing reputation and the world's curiosity about how women fared in a society like Iran's, it seemed more possible each year to make the system pay an international price for its refusal to reform its laws at home.

(Ebadi, *IA* 127)

3.4 The Problem of/with Interpretation

In Islam, there exists a tradition of intellectual interpretation and innovation known as *ijtihad*, practised by jurists and clerics over the centuries to debate the meaning of Koranic teachings as well as their application to modern ideas and situations. [...]

On the one hand, *ijtihad* imposes flexibility on Islamic law and creates an exciting space for adapting Islamic values and traditions to our lives in the modern world. But this flexibility is also precisely what makes *ijtihad*, and Islamic jurisprudence altogether, a tricky foundation on which to base inalienable, universal rights. *Ijtihad* frees us by removing the burden of definitiveness—we can interpret and reinterpret Koranic teachings forever; but it also means clerics can take the Universal Declaration of Human Rights home and argue about it richly for centuries. It means it is possible for everyone, always to have a point. It means that patriarchal men and powerful authoritarian regimes who repress in the name of Islam can exploit *ijtihad* to interpret Islam in the regressive, unforgiving manner that suits their sensibilities and political agendas. [...] This does not mean that Islam and equal rights for women are incompatible; it means that invoking Islam in a theocracy refracts the religion through a kaleidoscope, with interpretations perpetually shifting and mingling and the vantage of the most powerful prevailing.

(Ebadi, *IA* 191-2)

Shia Islam, as Ebadi explains has kept the door to *ijtihad* or interpretation open (unlike Sunni Islam) which is significant because sharia “is more a set of principles rather than a codified set of rules.” (Ebadi, *IA* 191) Jurists use logic and deductive principle to appraise a given matter especially as it pertains to contemporary interests and needs and then rule on it. For instance, one example of the use of *ijtihad* reflects Ayatollah Khomeini’s ruling that “state media could broadcast music despite the severe attitude of the senior clergy toward song.” (Ebadi, *IA* 191) Khomeini ruled thus to thwart the luring of young Iranians by Western media and song. However, as Ebadi points out it is also possible to spin interpretations using *ijtihad* in ways that reflect the cleric’s political interests and beliefs far from the spirit of the law to absurd extremes.

As Ebadi explains, *ijtihad* is an interpretive tool that can be used to express a progressive or a regressive worldview. Unfortunately, for Iranian society the religious elite that came to power in 1979 held especially patriarchal views that led to institutionalized gender inequality. As Azadeh Kian explains,

The Family Protection Law of 1967 was abrogated, and a series of regressions were imposed upon women’s rights in both the public and private realms. For example, an Islamic dress code was applied ...; important limitations were set for women in divorce and child custody; the minimum age of marriage was

lowered from 18 to nine years (increased to 13 years under the sixth *Majles* in 2002); women's access to judiciary occupations was prohibited, etc.
(Kian 24)

Ijtihad in the hands of patriarchal jurists has led to absurd interpretations of laws which Ebadi highlights in her memoir such as the case of Leila Fathi. Leila Fathi was an eleven-year old girl who was raped and murdered by three men. The local police arrested the three men, yet the prime suspect hung himself in prison. The two other suspects were found guilty of rape and were sentenced to death. As Ebadi explains the complexity of the case:

I mentioned earlier that under the Islamic penal code instituted after the revolution, a man's life is worth twice of a woman. In most Islamic countries, laws determining compensation apply only in financial cases, such as inheritance. The Islamic Republic, however, applies compensation, or "blood money" provisions, in criminal cases. Under Islamic law, the family of a victim of a homicide or manslaughter has the right to choose between legal punishment and financial compensation, referred to as blood money. Many Islamic scholars hold that blood money should be blind to gender, but Iran practices a discriminatory interpretation.

(Ebadi, *IA* 113-4)

Ebadi lists two examples of *ijtihad* or interpretation in the passage above, which have devastating consequences for Leila's family. Iranian law, unlike that in most Islamic countries applies compensation in criminal cases. Furthermore, "blood money" provisions are determined by gender-sensitive evaluations. Thus:

Under the Iranian code, the worth of a woman's life equals half of a man's, a point that leads to grotesque legal judgments that effectively punish the victim. In this instance, the judge ruled that the "blood money" for the two men was worth more than the life of a murdered eleven-year-old girl, and he demanded that her family come up with thousands of dollars to finance their executions.

(Ebadi, *IA* 114)

The victim's family is here saddled with the responsibility of paying for the executions of their daughter's rapists and murderers, a bizarre legal logic which rather than punish the perpetrators punishes the victim or in this case, the victim's family. Clearly, the law is flawed and Ebadi's high profile brought much attention to this case, yet could do nothing to aid the particular family in question, or overturn the laws which enabled such a ruling.

3.5 Reforming Family Law

In 2003 Ebadi was asked by a female member of parliament⁸² to draft a resolution on family law. "Write something that broadens women's rights, but in a way that compatible with Islam," she was asked, "so that we can defend it on the floor." (IA 185) Ebadi agreed and began to work on a law easing divorce for women. As Ebadi explains under current Iranian law it was "nearly impossible" for a women to secure a divorce, "she had to request her husband's permission to even initiate the process and was obliged to prove his insanity, infertility, or other grave unfitness to see it through." (IA 186-7) In fact though, Ebadi explains:

Classical Islamic law, or sharia did not always treat divorce so inflexibly, but the drafters of the Iranian code had opted for the most rigid interpretation. One school of thought in sharia, for example, holds that if a woman forfeits her *mehrieh* (marriage allowance) she can divorce her husband on the simple grounds of disliking him.

(Ebadi, IA 187)

Unfortunately however, the Iranian law dealing with divorce based on dislike required a relinquishing of the marriage allowance as well as the man's consent—which made it difficult for a woman to secure as well as financially disadvantageous. Searching through old legal tomes, Ebadi had found in sharia precedent for a woman divorcing her husband simply on the grounds that she did not like him. As she furthers:

Over the centuries, Islamic legal scholars had anticipated nearly all circumstances that men and women would encounter ... and had neatly outlined the sharia position on each. They had imagined that in some cases a woman would want to divorce her husband not because he was infertile, mentally ill, or abusive but simply because *she did not like him*, and they'd provided a way for her to extricate herself.

(Ebadi, IA 187)

Therefore, according to one school of thought in sharia, all that was required for a woman to gain a divorce is for her to relinquish her marriage allowance. The issue hinges then on the question of whether it suffices that a woman does not like her husband or whether she must indeed guarantee his consent. Most surprisingly,

⁸² There were fourteen female members of parliament in 2003. Beyond the main floor of parliament the female parliamentarians have their own offices (due to gender segregation) which shockingly lacked a door, chairs, tables and office equipment. (Ebadi, IA 185, 186, 188)

Ebadi shows that the *Sharh-e Lomeh*, the Shia Textbook of Jurisprudence does not at any point state that male consent is required. As Ebadi recalls the incident:

As I was defending the bill to the commission, an imperious, traditionalist cleric sitting next to me ... turned to address me: "Why have you written that male consent is not required for divorce?"

"Because it's not," I said. "And I'll prove it to you." I pulled out the *Sharh-e Lomeh*, the Shia Textbook of Jurisprudence. "This is the book you study in the seminary, on which you are tested in becoming a mullah," I stated. "It says nowhere in here that male consent is required. So why are you insisting that it is?"

(Ebadi, *IA* 187-8)

The cleric does not reply, but sends a clerk to remove Ebadi from the session of parliament. Clearly, Ebadi is correct on this point and hard-liners such as this cleric and those like him who ran Iran, neither wished to hear or sanction such gender equitable views which *can be found in sharia* and are *supported by their very own book of laws*. Not surprisingly the law which Ebadi drafted does not pass and it continues to be a great struggle for a woman in Islamic Iran to gain a divorce.

3.6 *Iran Awakening*: Publication History

Iran Awakening could not be published in Iran. “The censorship that prevails in the Islamic Republic”, Ebadi writes “has made it impossible to publish an honest account of my life [there].” (IA 210) Instead Ebadi thought to publish her memoir in in America not anticipating the challenges she would have to overcome to publish in the US as an Iranian citizen.

Ebadi explains that she hoped to publish her memoir in the West and especially in the United States for varying reasons that have to do with US-Iranian relations as well as America’s well-known championing of political dissidents:

When I received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, I believed that at least in the West, in open societies that protected freedom of expression, I could publish a memoir that would help correct stereotypes about Muslim women. I felt my experience could make a contribution to the accelerated [sic] debate about Islam and the West, and reach a wide audience. Beyond helping shade [sic] the debate about Islamic civilization and its encounter with modern America, I felt that the cold [sic] antagonisms between the US and Iran made communication between the two sides more urgent than ever. I imagined that the voices of Iranian who do not feel their governments and their diplomats represent them would be especially welcome in America.

(Ebadi, IA 210)

In fact, Ebadi discovers, even as she finds a literary agent interested in publishing her work, that sanctions regulations in the United States “made it virtually impossible for me to publish a memoir in America.” (IA 210) Ebadi in order to publish her memoir must file a lawsuit against the US Treasury Department which regulates “the import of books from Iran and other embargoed countries.” (IA 211) As she explains:

American officials, when pressed by publishers about the regulations, linked them to national security and insisted that it was possible to petition for a special approval. But if defending victims in the courts in the Islamic Republic taught me anything, it is that a single case is rarely the real battle; a case is a symptom of an injustice embedded in the law itself.

(Ebadi, IA 211)

While an exception might well have been made for Ebadi, she instead choses to fight the law in court:

Our lawsuit challenged the standing regulation against import of “information materials” from embargoed countries and argued that they violated the rights of American readers under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. In my declaration, I called the ban a critical missed opportunity, both for Americans to learn more about my country and its people from a variety

of Iranian voices and for a better understanding to be achieved between our two nations.

(Ebadi, *IA* 212)

In December 2004, the Treasury Department does indeed revise “its regulations on publications of works by citizens of embargoed nations.”⁸³ (*IA* 213) Ebadi characterizes this unique legal victory thus:

In the long and violent history of our countries, the Treasury Department’s revision is a modest step, but its symbolic value is of great encouragement to me. Is it not remarkable, in the end, that an Iranian woman living in her own country could have led to the efforts that made the U.S. government’s practices more just? It was a victory I took back to Iran and spoke of frequently, for its instructiveness as we look forward.

(Ebadi, *IA* 213-4)

And even more importantly, Ebadi’s words illustrate an Iranian lawyer’s testimony to the efficacy of the legal system in the United States and its international ramifications. As she states: “It [this ruling] allowed me to contradict what has become a political truism in the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic, that America understands only the language of force.” (Ebadi, *IA* 214)

Ebadi’s efforts along with several other “American organizations representing publishers, editors, and translators” (Ebadi, *IA* 212) are a remarkable example of transcultural legal foray beyond national boundaries resulting in the freer flow of information and texts. No doubt, Ebadi’s profession as judge and lawyer and her intent to publish in America has had a positive effect on the plight of many others from embargoed nations who may wish to publish in the United States. Ebadi’s text catalogues its own journey in international legal space and its very publication is testament to the memoirist’s professionalism and tenacity.

⁸³ “Had it not,” Ebadi notes, “it would have faced the prospect of a federal court striking down its policy as unconstitutional.” (Ebadi, *IA* 213)

3.7 'Transforming Iran Peacefully'

Ebadi's memoir while it recounts endless stories of intellectuals and dissidents being jailed and killed at the regime's hands is nonetheless written with the stated belief that regime change in Iran be both peaceful and come from within Iran rather than militarily from without. As the memoirist explains:

The threat of regime change by military force, while reserved as an option by some in the Western world, endangers nearly all of the efforts democracy-minded Iranians have made in these recent years. The threat of military force gives the system a pretext to crack down on its legitimate opposition and undermines the nascent civil society that is taking shape here. It makes Iranians overlook their resentment of the regime and move behind their unpopular leaders in an act of defensive nationalism. I can think of no scenario more alarming, no internal shift more dangerous than that engendered by the West imagining it can bring democracy to Iran through either military might or the fomentation of violent rebellion.

(Ebadi, *IA* 215)

Even as she describes her memoir as non-political (*IA* 216), Ebadi makes sure to highlight the importance of political change in Iran taking place peacefully and indigenously. Political change from without has proven so devastating for Iraq and the region, that thankfully the idea of military intervention in Iran is less and less of a reality at the present time. However, Ebadi's fear is not unjustified because even as Iran and world powers meet across the negotiating table, Washington hawks and beyond advocate for war with Iran. It is the memoirist's view that the fragile civil society that has been built in Iran in the past decades would lose its momentum and dissipate in the face of military intervention. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Ebadi highlights the role of the opposition that has formed in the last years: "not least a nation of educated, conscious women who are agitating for their own rights. They must be given the chance to fight their own fights, to transform their country uninterrupted." (*IA* 215)

Despite the overwhelming odds facing Iranian society which Ebadi knows first-hand, she insists on an independent course for Iran's future. Although Ebadi is currently living in exile in the UK, has been imprisoned in Iran and has had her life threatened, I imagine that she would continue to appeal for Iranian society and

especially for Iranian women to be provided the opportunity to battle their own battles and refashion their country from within at their own pace and in their own manner.

In a scathing review of *Iran Awakening* titled "Iran II: Inside the System" Canadian columnist, David Warren critiques Ebadi's memoir for arguing for reform and democracy from within the Iranian theocracy. Warren asks if Ebadi goals are the right ones and if they even achievable:

But are her goals the right ones, and are they achievable? Can an expressly Islamic political order be made to deliver equality, or democracy, or women's most basic rights? And if so, can such an order evolve naturally in Iran? I find each of these aspirations pie-in-the-sky; but I must assume Ebadi sincerely embraces them. She does no harm by ineffectually struggling for justice within Iran. But she can do no lasting good, either. As with those who tried to change Communism from within, her star is hitched to the system, and her work to humanize a fanatical tyranny will be obviated when it falls, brought down by others.

(Warren 67)

To read between the lines of Warren's critique is to see a view expressed that not only doubts that Islam is compatible with democracy but that also suggests that Ebadi has allied with the current regime and that her downfall is linked to its inevitable demise. In fact, despite Ebadi's belief that Islam and democracy are compatible, Ebadi has not linked herself with the ruling theocracy but rather tried to work within the legal religious system to achieve change. In the short run, clearly that has not worked because at risk of death and imprisonment, Ebadi has had to flee the country, negating Warren's claim of colluding with the current regime. The regime itself has proven more resilient than Warren suggests, the only open question remaining pertaining to the compatibility of Islam and democracy which Ebadi responds to below. Furthermore, it is important to note, Ebadi links the *peaceful* transformation of Iranian society to the view that a "positive interpretation of Islam" and democracy are congruous, thus:

Over the years, I have endured all manner of slights and attacks, been told that I must not appreciate or grasp the real spirit of democracy if I can claim in the same breath that freedom and human rights are not perforce in conflict with Islam. When I heard the statement of the [Nobel] prize read aloud, heard my religion mentioned specifically alongside my work defending Iranians' rights, I knew at that moment what was being recognized: the belief in a positive interpretation of Islam, and the power of that belief to aid Iranians who aspire to peacefully transform their country.

(Ebadi 204)

4. Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist

America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish.

George Bush⁸⁴

I was struck by how traditional your empire appeared. Armed sentries manned the check post at which I sought entry; being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection; once admitted I hired a charioteer who belonged to a serf class lacking the requisite permission to abide legally and forced therefore to accept work at lower pay; I myself was a form of indentured servant whose right to remain was dependent upon the continued benevolence of my employer.

(Hamid, *RF* 178)

Focus on the fundamentals. This was Underwood Samson's⁸⁵ guiding principle, drilled into us since our first day at work. It mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value. And that was precisely what I continued to do, more often than not with both skill and enthusiasm.

(Hamid, *RF* 112)

I knew what I wanted to say, but it was complicated and perhaps controversial, and I wanted to say it effectively -- in other words, in a way that used the seductive power of narrative fiction to deliver something not entirely palatable.

(Hamid 2007c)

In fact, Hamid's title contains an irony because, while Changez is indeed slow to oppose American might, as a secular Muslim he is no religious fundamentalist. (The true fundamentalists are the employees of Underwood Samson, whose relentless focus on the global bottom line is the secular

⁸⁴ Qtd. in Harvey 4.

⁸⁵ Claire Chambers analyses : " Underwood Samson (its name implies underhandedness, undertakers, dead wood and the biblical behemoth, Samson, who eventually loses his strength)." (177)

complement to Al-Qaeda's dreams of a new caliphate.)⁸⁶
(Hart and Hansen 509)

I believe that the core skill of a novelist is empathy: the ability to imagine what someone else might feel. And I believe that the world is suffering from a deficit of empathy at the moment: the political positions of both Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush are founded on failures of empathy, failures of compassion towards people who seem different. By taking readers inside a man who both loves and is angered by America, and hopefully by allowing readers to feel what that man feels, I hope to show that the world is more complicated than politicians and newspapers usually have time for. We need to stop being so confused by the fear we are fed: a shared humanity unites us with people we are encouraged to think of as our enemies.

(Hamid 2007b)

⁸⁶ In a footnote, Hart and Hansen add:

In the nervous period after 9/11, Changez clings to his work as an economic analyst in language that clarifies its status as a secular fundamentalism, complete with immanent revelation and messianic teleology: "I was never better at the pursuit of fundamentals than I was at that time, analyzing data as though my life depended on it. Our creed was one which valued above all else maximum productivity, and such a creed was for me doubly reassuring because it was quantifiable—and hence knowable—in a period of great uncertainty, and because it remained utterly convinced of the possibility of progress while others longed for a sort of classical period that had come and gone, if it had ever existed at all" (116–17).

4.1 In the Guise of a ‘Clash of Civilizations’

Cultural artefacts such as the clash regime are comparable to nationalisms, imperialisms, or religious fundamentalisms. They are systemic. They articulate and produce, they animate and make things happen. They make us believe in things, in justice, the nation, war. As such, the clash regime refers to more than a metanarrative. It is more powerful than organising principles which promise to give comprehensive meaning to aspects of our surrounding social world. It is even more powerful than discursive formations, more consequential than systematic patterns of narratives and statements bound up with each other. We are not dealing with something trivial here.

(Adib-Moghaddam 5)

I wish to argue for Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as an example of a sort of deterritorialization of literature which forces readers to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West, “Them and Us” and so on – those categories continuously insisted upon in “war on terror” discourse.

(Morey 138)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) by Mohsin Hamid is a thriller set in dramatic monologue modelled after Camus’s *The Fall* (*La Chute*) in the guise of a ‘clash of civilizations.’⁸⁷ In the most peaceable representation possible: a textual conflict, Hamid pits an unnamed American and an apparently native Pakistani in a wordy scrimmage of distrust, suspicion and doubt in the tense weeks after the events of September 11th, the outcome of which is left unresolved. *Ah but there’s the rub*. The American interlocutor is silent but not completely obscured, for a great many of his facial expressions and reactions are recorded, by a potentially *unreliable* Pakistani narrator.⁸⁸ Tinged with opacity and doubt, the narrative feeds on the reader’s own bias

⁸⁷ The term ‘clash of civilizations’ was coined by Bernard Lewis in 1957. (Bonney 54) Samuel P. Huntington is better known for the term which is the title of his 1993 essay “The clash of civilizations?” (Bonney ix) and subsequent book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996). “It is my hypothesis,” Huntington wrote, “that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of culture will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.” (Qtd. in Bonney 37)

⁸⁸ Unreliable narration is part of the author’s narrative strategy which contributes to the novel’s suspense. The reader must make her own decision as to the reliability of the autodiegetic narrator for there is neither direct confirmation nor contradiction of the narrator’s monologue. See “Unreliable Narration” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.

and expectation⁸⁹, alternately and kaleidoscopically building up a struggle between the two men, hinting perhaps, as to the nature of the true predator but never equivocally declaring the pacificity of one or the militancy of the other.

In cagey and indirect language, the bearded Pakistani and the well-built, hefty American appear to circle one another—in preparation for a burst of violence and the death of one or the other—either that of the Pakistani ‘militant’ or the American ‘army officer’, or as it is implied, CIA agent. In fact, this wonderfully taut dramatic monologue is a parody of a “clash of civilizations” which, as the narrator begins to draw out, collapses civilizational dichotomies such as American/Pakistani, Non-Muslim/Muslim, Westerner/Easterner, Northerner/ Southerner.

⁸⁹ “In my novel,” Hamid has stated,” there is also an attempt to fundamentally implicate the reader. So if you view the world as fundamentally as [sic] a world where there is a war between civilizations, then the novel is a thriller. If you don’t it equally is a random encounter between two separate guys who go their separate ways. So if it’s a thriller or not depends on the preconceptions we bring to it as readers.” (Hamid qtd. in Chambers, 178)

4.2 Diverging Narratives: The Frame Story and the Embedded Narrative

Post-9/11 US militaristic rhetoric and action, with their sweeping domestic and international consequences, have had little truck with the other. In marked contrast, recent Pakistani fictions---[...]---use what Gayatri Spivak refers to as the epistemological breach of 9/11 to construct an ethical moment, a repositioning in which the primary other of the US's "war on terror," the Muslim male, becomes a self.

(Cilano 202)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist makes use of the literary techniques of the frame story and embedded narrative to distinguish between the text's varying levels of interaction and disclosure. While the frame story of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be read as a parable of Huntington's so-called 'clash of civilizations', the embedded narrative problematizes identity in a number of ways which serve to deconstruct the idea of a 'clash of civilizations' by humanizing the terms and manner of dialogue. Rather than confrontation as dialogue which characterizes the frame narrative, there is an attempt at genuine communication in the embedded narrative, in which the protagonist bares his heart to his interlocutor and recounts the story of his years in America, seemingly without censure or embarrassment.

Genuine communication is possible only when interlocutors meet as equals showing a modicum of respect for both the views of the other and the difference between them: the 'otherness' of the other. That is to say, if one or the other interlocutor denies the other his humanity, his agency, his right to self-expression then dialogue is not possible and confrontation or violence or ultimately even war-like scenarios will ensue. Via the embedded narrative, which avoids the simplistic, binary reductions of identity and loyalty of the frame narrative, a minority voice is given expression. What is unique about this minority voice is that it represents the viewpoint of an educated, transcultural Pakistani formerly living and working at the pinnacle in the American metropolis. This is a hybrid position, neither wholly American nor wholly Pakistani or Muslim. The American viewpoint has been heard over and over again, this "other" viewpoint which the narrator, Changez communicates has rarely been heard. Hamid in silencing the American interlocutor has given credence to this "other" and often unheard voice.

In the frame narrative, as in *Realpolitik*, there is only one way for an American to interact with a Pakistani—especially after 9/11—which is with mutual suspicion and doubt most likely leading to conflict. In the embedded narrative, something unusual occurs in which one interlocutor speaks and the other conceivably listens, that is to say that from a monologue a form of dialogue is introduced in which for a short moment the American interlocutor actually listens to his “other”, his Pakistani interlocutor. There is a difference, therefore, between the silence of the American interlocutor in the frame narrative and in the embedded narrative. There is a silence, in the frame narrative, of distance and disapproval, of hate or disdain. The silence of the American interlocutor which ensues in the embedded narrative, like that of the reader, becomes the silence of close attention and at least partial identification with the story and the character’s portrayed. For as long as the narrator is reciting his tale, his American interlocutor is transported by the tale leading to a pause in the hostilities and either unable or unwilling to resume hostilities until the story-telling ends. Much like but also unlike, the *Tales of 1001 Nights* in which Scheherzade tells stories to save her life, the narrator in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* tells stories that he feels need to be told, that also delay or fend off conflict with his interlocutor; ultimately, however a return to the real world is forged and one or the other of the interlocutors will bring on the demise of the other, or so the ending of the narrative hints.

There is no happy end written into *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, evidently one or the other, American or Pakistani, must perish. The craftiness of the text is its ambiguous conclusion, leaving it to the reader to decide who in the larger scheme of things, is more likely to be the aggressor and who is more likely to be the victim.

4.3 In the Space of an Evening: Sundown in Old Anarkali District

At the beginning of a tale two adversaries meet. At the end of the tale one adversary will likely kill the other. During the tale, however, both the reader and the interlocutors are transformed by the story told. Let us recall, how it all begins.

In the Old Anarkali District of Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city, a bearded Pakistani accosts a foreigner whom he takes for an American. As Cecile Girardin outlines:

A man of [presumed] American citizenship is called out by a young [Pakistani] man named Changez, in an outdoor restaurant in Lahore: "Excuse me sir but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you [Do not be frightened by my beard. I am a lover of America]". Apparently this opening leads to an encounter between two characters; in fact it initiates an exclusion, since the American character has no say as such in the text—as in *La Chute*, by Albert Camus, which is the main intertext of the novel. The [dramatic] monologue includes, although indirectly and partially, some of his reactions, but the lack of an alternative viewpoint makes it difficult to understand the nature of the narrator's interaction with the American. The text consists of embedded narratives, each of which describes an aspect of the background of Changez—his student years at Princeton, his hiring by a prestigious audit firm and then his reaction, apparently unexpected, to the 9/11 events, which prompted him to leave the U.S. to go back to Pakistan. Each episode of his life is narrated within the ominous context of a probable conflict with his silent and silenced interlocutor. The reader is led to wonder whether the American is a secret agent who has come to murder him, and whether the Pakistani is a terrorist, reluctant as he might be, whose goal is to eliminate the American character.

In the space of one evening which makes the novel's time frame, Changez, the autodiegetic narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* recalls his life in America before 9/11 and after the cataclysmic events of that day. The reader and the silent American interlocutor hear Changez recount his pleasure and contentment at attending Princeton University, at being hired by a prestigious Wall Street firm, Samson Underwood and at meeting the beautiful and talented Erica. For instance, Changez recalls:

What did I think of Princeton? Well, the answer to that question requires a story. When I first arrived, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings—younger, I later learned, than many of the mosques of this city, but made through acid treatment and ingenious stonemasonry to look older—and thought, *This is a dream come true*. Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. *I have access to this beautiful campus, I*

thought, to professors who are titans in their fields and fellow students who are philosopher-kings in the making.

(Hamid, *RF* 3)

I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was immediately a New Yorker. [...] It still occupies a great place of fondness in my heart, which is quite something, I must say, given the circumstances under which, after only eight months of residence, I would later depart.

(Hamid, *RF* 37)

Changez blends beautifully into his life as a New Yorker and is almost completely taken by the promise of the American dream, except for the few times he compares Pakistan to America; a sentiment which he duly represses so to continue to partake in his American adventure:

Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers, while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned, unsanitary affairs, and America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education. To be reminded of this vast disparity was, for me, to be ashamed.

But not on that day. On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm's impressive offices made me proud.

(Hamid, *RF* 38)

In counterpoint to Changez's narrative, it is interesting to observe the "interaction" between the narrator and his silent American interlocutor as in this passage:

But why do you recoil? Ah yes, this beggar is a particularly unfortunate fellow. One can only wonder what series of *accidents* could have left him so thoroughly disfigured. He draws close to you because you are a foreigner. Will you give him something? No? Very wise; one ought not to encourage beggars, and yes, you are right, it is far better to donate to charities that address the causes of poverty rather than to him, a creature who is merely its symptom. What am I doing? I am handing him a few rupees—misguidedly of course, and out of habit. There, he offers us his prayers for our well-being; now he is on his way.

(Hamid, *RF* 45)

Let us return to Changez's tale and the pivotal event which causes him to begin to rethink his love-affair with America. In late October, as he watches the evening news, Changez finds himself trembling with fury:

I chanced upon a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post. My reaction caught me by surprise; Afghanistan was Pakistan's neighbour, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation besides, and the sight of what I took to be the beginning of its invasion by your countrymen caused me to

tremble with fury. I had to sit down to calm myself, and I remember polishing off a third of a bottle of whiskey before I was able to fall asleep.

(Hamid, *RF* 113-4)

It is the American response to the events of 9/11 that bring about an unexpected change in Changez which ultimately leads to his changing careers and leaving America for Pakistan. The change in Changez is both physical (he grows a beard⁹⁰) as well as cultural and intellectual. The events of 9/11 and their aftermath profoundly reform Changez's view of himself, of his work, and of America and his part of the world: Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. Up until 9/11 Changez was happy to identify himself as a New Yorker blending into the multicultural city, pushing to the wayside his other loyalties and identities. After 9/11 the changes Changez⁹¹ experiences as a Muslim (sometimes as a perceived Arab) as well as the changes he observes in the American response to the events of September 11 – domestically and internationally – lead him with the help of a Chilean mentor to dissociate himself from the American homeland and from the American dream.

In the space of an evening, Changez recounts a long and intricate story that features his divided sense of loyalty once he realizes the direct consequences of the 'War on Terror' on his native region of Southwest Asia. As Richard Bonney in *False Prophets: The 'Clash of Civilizations' and the Global War on Terror* explains, it is not the events of September 11 but rather America's reaction to 9/11 that has created a potential rift between cultures and civilizations:

In some measure, therefore, it may appear that something akin to a 'clash of civilizations' was precipitated by 9/11. Ostensibly, the Huntington thesis seems to have been, if not proven, remarkably prescient. Closer examination, however, will reveal that this is much less clear-cut than is commonly supposed. In answer to President George W. Bush's claim that '11 September changed our world', 'rather it was America's reaction to 11 September that changed the world'. The US 'suffered a terrorist attack unprecedented in its scale and

⁹⁰ Changez explains: "For despite my mother's request, and my knowledge of the difficulties it could well present me at immigration, I had not shaved my two-week-old-beard. It was perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, [...]; I do not now recall my precise motivations. I know only that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters who were my coworkers, and that inside me, for multiple reasons, I was deeply angry." (Hamid, *RF* 147-8).

⁹¹ One critic has observed: "While several reviewers have complained that "Changez" is too obvious a name for a character in this situation, Hamid has pointed out that it doesn't signify "change" but is instead "the Urdu [pronunciation of the] name for Genghis, as in Genghis Khan." He elaborates: It's the name of a warrior, and the novel plays with the notion of a parallel between war and international finance, which is Changez' occupation. But at the same time, the name cautions against a particular reading of the novel. Genghis attacked the Arab Muslim civilization of his time, so Changez would be an odd choice of name for a Muslim fundamentalist ("Mohsin Hamid: 'We Are Already Afraid')." (Eads) (See also Chambers 177)

destructiveness and in so doing lost its sense of security'. It also 'lost its sense of perspective.'

(Bonney 4)

Furthermore, Homi Bhabha with added cultural sensitivity argues against the accuracy of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis, warning of the many dangers of its use and, significantly, emphasizing the fact that those who administer terror do so as a **political** act and not a civilizational or cultural practice:

[T]he decision to *implement* and administer terror, whether it is done in the name of god or the state, is a *political decision*, not a civilizational or cultural practice. Ironically, the 'clash of civilisations' is an aggressive discourse often used by totalitarians and terrorists to justify their worst deeds, to induce holy terror and create a debilitating psychosis of persecution amongst oppressed, powerless peoples. When we use the civilizational argument against them, we are, unwittingly perhaps, speaking in the divisive tongue of tyrants. When American foreign and economic policy is conducted in terms of the civilizational divisions of 'them' and 'us', the nation assumes that hawkish, imperialist aspect that provokes a widespread sense of injustice, indignation and fear. The embattled and embalmed narrative of civilizational clash is often deployed to justify the reckless destruction of civilians who are suspected by virtue of their culture (read second nature), of being terrorists or protecting them.

(Bhabha, *Terror* 3-4)

4.4 *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Anti-Americanism

The Reluctant Fundamentalist has been criticized for being anti-American (Darda 115) and while there are specific instances in which the narrative indicates sentiment that can be considered antagonistic to America⁹² in large part, what occurs is a separation on the part of the protagonist and narrator literally and also politically, from America and American nostalgia and war-mongering after 9/11. As Changez highlights:

It seemed to me then—and to be honest, sir, seems to me still—that America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwillingly to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousands of miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own. I resolved to do so as best I could. But first I had to depart. I rode to JFK on a crisp, clear afternoon ...

(Hamid, *RF* 190-1)

Viewed and reviewed from an Asian or Muslim perspective, American foreign policy takes on a rather negative light after the US-led war on Afghanistan, which as a nation cannot be held responsible for the events of 9/11. As Bonney reminds us:

No Middle-Eastern or other Muslim-majority state attacked the US in 2001. The al-Qaeda network – an extremist terror group motivated by a political ideology – not the Taliban-controlled state of Afghanistan, let alone the Afghan people, launched the attacks of 9/11; [...]. ('There is no evidence of the involvement of the people of Afghanistan in what happened in America,' bin Laden affirmed on 7 November 2001.)

(Bonney 4)

Changez remembers:

I reflected that I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan; in each of the major conflicts that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role.

(Hamid, *RF* 177)

⁹² Watching the events of September 11 unfold on a television screen from Manila the protagonist and narrator is surprised to find himself smiling, not at the death of so many thousands, but at the symbolism of the event. As Changez explains: "[N]o, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that somebody had so visibly brought America to her knees." (Hamid, *RF* 83)

As the narrator begins to disentangle himself from his American identity, a work encounter with a Chilean chief of a publishing company⁹³ serves to further separate Changez from US politics and finance. The elderly Chilean, Juan-Bautista, suggests to Changez that he is acting like an Ottoman janissary. As Changez explains:

Juan-Bautista's words plunged me into a deep bout of introspection. I spent that night considering what I had become. There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war. Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn! I had thrown in my lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the empire, when all along I was predisposed to feel compassion for those, like Juan-Bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain.

(Hamid, *RF* 173)

Changez focus on the economic and business fundamentals as prescribed by his employer are already beginning to wane, as more personal emotional and political matters take up his attention. The once spellbinding world of international finance starts to lose its lustre as Changez begins to assess personal and political costs, not as an Underwood Samson employee, but as a Pakistani national and citizen. Changez gradually begins to lose regard for his overzealous Underwood Samson superior in Chile:

I could not respect how he functioned so completely immersed in the structures of his professional micro-universe. Yes, I too had previously derived comfort from my firm's exhortations to focus intensely on work, but now I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present. In other words, my blinders were coming off, and I was dazzled and rendered immobile by the sudden broadening of my arc of vision.

(Hamid, *RF* 165)

Most importantly, Changez decides to leave his job and career in international finance as begins to understand his (albeit minor) potential role in facilitating America's financial prowess over poorer "less-developed" nations such as Pakistan, alternately using aid or sanctions to dictate foreign policy and allegiance. As he articulates and emphasizes:

Moreover I knew from my experience as a Pakistani—of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions—that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power. It was right for me to refuse to participate

⁹³ In fact, Changez is on assignment from Underwood Samson to estimate the value of Juan Bautista's firm, which most likely would be liquidated by new investors. (*RF* 161)

any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision.

(Hamid, *RF* 177)

4.5 Misunderstanding American Nostalgia After 9/11

Changez is for the most part an astute observer of American life, able to understand its nuances and codes. Following 9/11 and its aftermath, however, he becomes a less astute observer and commentator on American life as his focus shifts to important events overseas. Changez (and I imagine, Hamid presumably) note the *effect* of the events of 9/11 on America and Americans without understanding their rather significant *cause*. As Changez notes:

[I]t seemed to me that America ... was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time. There was something undeniably retro about the flags and uniforms, about generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as *duty* and *honor*. I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back.

(Hamid, RF 130-1)

Of course, Americans after 9/11 would become nostalgic, for, for the first time the American mainland⁹⁴ has been targeted. Such an attack has a tremendous psychological impact as Judith Butler explains: “That US boundaries were breached, that an unbearable vulnerability was exposed, that a terrible toll on human life was taken, were, and are, causes for fear and for mourning.” (Butler XI-XII) Such an unprecedented attack leads to a loss of what Butler terms American ‘First Worldism’:

Most Americans have probably experienced something like the loss of their First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11 and its aftermath. What kind of loss is this? It is the loss of the prerogative, only and always, to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one’s own boundaries transgressed. The United States was supposed to be the place that could not be attacked, where life was safe from violence initiated from abroad, where the only violence we knew was the kind we inflicted on ourselves. The violence that we inflict on others is only—and always—selectively brought into public view. ...

The loss of First World presumption is the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world itself as national entitlement.

(Butler 39)

It is not surprising that Changez finds himself in what seems to be a totally transformed America in which as he explains, his position is at best, uncertain:

⁹⁴ Hawaii it must be noted is not directly part of the American mainland. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was decisive in its impact, but had nothing like the cataclysmic effect of 9/11.

Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in Technicolor but in grainy black and white. What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me—a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know—but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent. I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether—if it could indeed be animated—it contained a part written for someone like me.

(Hamid, *RF* 131)

Butler describes the heightened sense of fear and anxiety in which Americans found themselves following September 11. She mentions the almost frenetic citizen racial profiling that occurs in such instances:

Our general response is anxiety, rage; a radical desire for security, a shoring-up of the borders against what is perceived as alien; a heightened surveillance of Arab peoples and anyone who looks vaguely Arab in the dominant racial imaginary, anyone who looks like someone you once knew who was of Arab descent, or who you thought was—often citizens, it turns out, often Sikhs, often Hindus, even sometimes Israelis, especially Sephardim, often Arab-Americans, recent arrivals or those who have been in the US for decades.

(Butler 39)

What Changez misses and what Ramazani highlights is that the once impenetrable border between America and the rest of the world, “us” and “them”, inside and outside no longer exists after 9/11:

Indeed, the symbolic apotheosis of this fantasy of omnipotence may be the mythical tegument of the Missile Defense System, where the attempt to inscribe an impenetrable boundary between “us” and “them,” inside and outside, ignores the hard lesson of September 11—that the dangerous outside is already inside us, that globalization means vulnerability, the interdependence of “First” and “Third” Worlds.

(Ramazani 119-120)

Globalization, as Ramazani stresses, leads after 9/11 to an American vulnerability- to an interdependence between nations which prior to 9/11 had little to no impact on Americans. Changez, embroiled in turbulent permutations of his own development (and events overseas) has intuited an important aspect of the impact of 9/11 which ought to lead an increased American sense of empathy with other peoples and nations⁹⁵--which can only also happen after the devastating aftershocks of the attacks of September 11 are worked through.

⁹⁵ “At the same time, I consider our recent trauma to be an opportunity for reconsideration of United States hubris and the importance of establishing more radically egalitarian international ties.” (Butler, 40)

5. Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*

5.1 *The Side To Be On*

But even if the world's beauty and love are on the edge of destruction, theirs is still the one side to be on.

(Rushdie qtd in Aslam 152)

Post-9/11 US militaristic rhetoric and action, with their sweeping domestic and international consequences, have had little truck with the other. In marked contrast, recent Pakistani fictions---[...]---use what Gayatri Spivak refers to as the epistemological breach of 9/11 to construct an ethical moment, a repositioning in which the primary other of the US's "war on terror," the Muslim male, becomes a self.

(Cilano 202)

We've lived through an extraordinary decade. It began with 9/11 and ended with the Arab Spring, but between that we had the war on terror, the call to jihad, the invasions on Iraq and Afghanistan, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, the murder of Benazir Bhutto, the assassination of Osama bin Laden. I wanted to find a story which would encapsulate all this without the story losing its shape. Writers don't tell you what to think, they tell you what to think about.

(Aslam qtd in East)

Nadeem Aslam is a masterful storyteller. More than just masterful storytelling Nadeem Aslam in *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) takes his readers to the heart of conflict – to town and villages in Pakistan and Afghanistan during the US-led War in Afghanistan after September the 11th – to sites of jihadists and peace-lovers, from torture camps to sites of splendid natural beauty, clear starlit nights and verdant gardens. Aslam's vast novelistic landscape encompasses a range of detail and description – yet its most pressing concerns are ethical issues predicated on how human beings treat one another. Aslam uses fiction to tease out moral choices and to show his characters grappling with right action – almost didactically – to demonstrate the challenging and often debilitating moral high ground which he advocates at all costs.

Although the events of 9/11 occur miles away from Pakistan their consequences are closely felt even in the small fictional town of Heer. War is raging in neighbouring Afghanistan and young men are slipping over the border to go and join the fighting.

Unlike them, Jeo (and his foster brother Mikal) are headed for Afghanistan *not* to join the fighting but to aid the wounded as Jeo is a third-year medical student and wants to be of assistance. Aslam from the outset, writing against the grain and circumventing stereotype, introduces characters like Jeo and especially Mikal, who are both Muslim and Pakistani and gentle, loving, and peaceful.

Mikal is named after the Archangel Mikal (Michael) and although a drifter since the age of fifteen is humble and unassuming and prefers his own solitude to the house of his foster-father Rohan. Possessed of rare mechanical skill, he supports himself by working at a gun-shop. Unbeknownst to Jeo, both he and Mikal are in love with the same girl, Naheed, whom Jeo married a year ago, but this does not stop Mikal from joining Jeo in his journey to the Afghan border, mostly to protect his more naïve foster-brother.

Aslam's universe of characters is both broad and varied and includes Pakistanis and Afghanis of violent and malevolent natures who sell the two unsuspecting young men to a Taliban war lord who sends them directly to the battle field where Jeo is killed. Mikal is captured and sold to the Americans as an Al Qaeda operative but not before his two index fingers are brutally cut off.

The Blind Man's Garden is the story of Mikal's ability to endure and overcome unspeakable horrors such as internment in an American interrogation camp from which he is mercifully released but not before he, in an act of mistaken self-defence, kills two of his American captors. Ultimately haunted by this inadvertent murder, Mikal does not find peace until he rights his wrong by saving and protecting an American soldier, at huge personal risk, who unbeknownst to him is the brother of one of his victims. Mikal may never make it back to his town of Heer and the woman he loves, Naheed, but he most certainly does all he can to atone for the murders he committed, despite the horrors he has endured at the hands of his American interrogators.

Tara, Naheed's mother tries at one point to assuage Mikal of his guilt concerning the murder of the two Americans:

['Y]ou might want to rethink some of the guilt you've been carrying around about shooting those Americans.'

'I'll try. The men I killed had mothers, fathers, probably wives and children. I killed them and must pay for the crime.'

'But there's no need to be so hard on yourself, at least until perfect order reigns in the world. Life is difficult at times and they goaded you and you were confused. Part of the blame lies with them. Don't hold yourself to too exacting a standard.'

‘That can be an excuse to not hold yourself to any standard at all.’

‘That too is true.’

(Aslam 364)

All life is precious to Mikal and he does not distinguish American life from Pakistani or Afghani life. Aslam repeatedly places Mikal in situations of great moral complexity and each time Mikal takes the high road, thus providing literature with alternate examples to the Western stereotype of the aggressive, violent Muslim male.

5.2 Faith and Fundamentalism in *The Blind Man's Garden*

However, the decision to *implement* and administer terror, whether it is done in the name of god or the state, is a *political decision*, not a civilizational or cultural practice. Ironically, the 'clash of civilisations' is an aggressive discourse often used by totalitarians and terrorists to justify their worst deeds, to induce holy terror and create a debilitating psychosis of persecution amongst oppressed, powerless peoples. When we use the civilizational argument against *them*, we are, unwittingly perhaps, speaking in the divisive tongue of tyrants. When American foreign and economic policy is conducted in terms of the civilizational divisions of 'them' and 'us', the nation assumes that hawkish, imperialist aspect that provokes a widespread sense of injustice, indignation and fear. The embattled and embalmed narrative of civilizational clash is often deployed to justify the reckless destruction of civilians who are suspected by virtue of their culture (read second nature), of being terrorists or protecting them.

Once we see terrorism as an organized political action, rather than the expression of cultural or civilizational 'difference', we can both fight it and look towards the future. A future that makes common cause between the American victims of terror, and those peoples around the world who are fated to live in countries governed by regimes or organizations that implement such unlawful and inhuman policies. Only those societies of the North and the South that ensure the widest democratic participation and protection for their citizens are in a position to make the deadly difficult decisions that 'just' wars demand. To confront the politics of terror, out of a sense of democratic solidarity rather than retaliation, gives us some faint hope for the future. Hope, that we might be able to establish a vision of a global society, informed by civil liberties and human rights, that carries with it the shared obligations and responsibilities of common, collaborative citizenship.

(Bhabha, *Terror and After* 3-4)

Postcolonial writing, whether defined under the heading of resistance or of hybrid cosmopolitanism, does not however provide justifications of terror or sidestep the pain and wrong that it is the objective of a terrorist act to inflict. This is important to acknowledge. What it can provide is an understanding of what is at stake subjectively and sequentially for the different parties involved when terrorism takes place. In this sense, I want to suggest, it supplies ways of thinking through and beyond terror, and of developing workable political responses to it.

(Boehmer 7)

Aslam cleverly distinguishes between faith and fundamentalism in *The Blind Man's Garden*. Aslam shows those of faith to be confident in their beliefs contributing to their societies while those with fundamentalist tendencies destroy and malign for political purpose, as Bhabha suggests above.

Rohan, father of Jeo and foster-father of Mikal is the founder of a school and a magnificent garden, the eponymous blind man of the novel, even though he does not

lose his sight until later in the novel. Having visited what he considers to be the “six centers of Islam’s bygone brilliance” (Aslam 21) he builds a school he names ‘Ardent Spirit’ made up of six houses named after the six centers: Mecca House, Baghdad House, Cordoba House, Cairo House, Delhi House and Ottoman House. Each house is situated amongst foliage from its region and a tablet affixed beside its entrance explains the historical, cultural or religious significance of the house:

Mecca House is situated amid Arabian date palms that release their fruit onto the roof throughout summer A tablet carrying the name is affixed beside the entrance, reading, *It was in order to determine the exact direction of Mecca that Muslims had developed an interest in geometry and mathematics, and had eventually invented trigonometry.* The words were intended to remind the children of their legacy, Islam’s long inheritance of knowledge and achievement.

(Aslam 21)

After the death of his wife, Rohan gives up the school and a new building is built across the river, and the original Ardent House and garden become his home. Unfortunately, Ardent Spirit then develops links with Pakistan’s intelligence agency, ISI and becomes a jihadi training camp (Aslam 34). Years later it is taken over by a former major in the Pakistani army, Major Kyra, who with his students is considering bombing a Christian church attached to a school.⁹⁶ (It is important to note the *political* purpose in all the jihadi aims):

‘Bombing the church or the Christian school will not achieve anything,’ Kyra says. ‘Such explosions in other places have not deterred the West from continuing with its war, nor forced the Pakistani government to withdraw its support for the Western occupiers.’

‘We are the world’s seventh nuclear power,’ the boy from Ottoman House⁹⁷ says quietly, ‘and yet our government does the bidding of the Americans, as though were nothing but beggars.’ The knowledge of his helplessness is making him angry, he is the brother of someone who has gone to Afghanistan in October and is now believed to be in US custody.

‘Twenty or thirty Pakistanis, be they Christian or Muslim, dying in an explosion in Pakistan is not going to matter at all,’ Kyra says. ‘Neither our government nor anyone in the West will care about it.’

The head of Ottoman House says, ‘If we don’t send a message now they’ll attack other Muslim countries.’

...

‘Why don’t we raid the school and hold everyone hostage? The teachers and the students. Release a list of demands. We should ask for the Americans to

⁹⁶ Earlier in the text, Aslam writes: “Those claiming responsibility [for attacks on churches] had said that since Western Christians were bombing and destroying mosques in Afghanistan, they were beginning a campaign to annihilate churches in Pakistan.” (Aslam 94.)

⁹⁷ The new Ardent House has kept the names of the six houses.

leave Afghanistan and free all our brothers who are being held prisoner by them.'

(Aslam 192-3)

The Western reader has very little access to views such as those of Major Kyra and his students and while there is never a justification for violence, the helplessness and powerlessness of the jihadists is important to note. They are caught in a web of political (and military) action and reaction that reflects the uneven playing field of the geopolitical stage.

Major Kyra and his students are small-scale jihadists but as Aslam deftly shows they have the power to destroy the lives and dreams of those in the universe of the novel. Labelled "thugs with Korans" (Aslam 305) they do attack the Christian school, and kill among others Rohan's Muslim foster-son, Basie who teaches there, along with many others including children!

5.3 America as Portrayed in *The Blind Man's Garden*

On or about Sept. 11, 2001, American character changed. What Americans had proudly flaunted as “our highest values” were now judged to be luxuries that in a new time of peril the country could ill afford. Justice, and its cardinal principle of innocent until proven guilty, became a risk, its indulgence a weakness. Asked recently about an innocent man who had been tortured to death in an American “black site” in Afghanistan, former Vice President Dick Cheney did not hesitate. “I’m more concerned,” he said, “with bad guys who got out and released than I am with a few that, in fact, were innocent.” In this new era in which all would be sacrificed to protect the country, torture and even murder of the innocent must be counted simply “collateral damage.”

(Danner)

War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueler it is, the sooner it will be over.

William Tecumseh Sherman

America is a significant marker of the “other” in *The Blind Man's Garden*. From the beginning of the novel, the events of September 11 are particularly significant to this region of Southwest Asia which experiences the US-led war in Afghanistan as a result of the attacks. As has been discussed before, there is no direct link between the events of 9/11 and the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan. However, in the absence of a definable state enemy America regrettably substituted Afghanistan -- leading to the beginning of hostilities there, on October 7, 2001. As Richard Bonney underscores:

No Middle Eastern or other Muslim-majority state attacked the US in 2001. The al-Qaeda network – an extremist terror group motivated by a political ideology – not the Taliban-controlled state of Afghanistan, let alone the Afghan people, launched the attacks of 9/11; ... (‘There is no evidence of the involvement of the people of Afghanistan in what happened in America,’ bin Laden affirmed on 7 November 2001.)

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was attacked as a ‘rogue-state’ sponsor of terrorism by the United States and its allies in retaliation for the events of 9/11, but the majority of the hijackers on 11 September were Saudi nationals, not Afghans and Mullah Omar, the ruler of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, was betrayed by bin Laden, who authorized the attacks in contravention of explicit assurances that he would not do so.

(Bonney 4-5)

From the outset the war in Afghanistan is questioned and critiqued by the more politically-minded characters in the novel. A certain element of disbelief in the events

of 9/11 is voiced by some, such as Major Kyra who wonders how it is at all possible for the pilots on 9/11 to have bypassed air traffic control. 9/11 was staged, Kyra believes “to invent an excuse to begin invading Muslim lands one by one.” Equally grievous to Kyra’s thinking is “the alliance that the Pakistani government has formed with the United States and the West, helping these empires as they annihilate Afghanistan.” (Aslam 33) Kyra’s black and white thinking makes it very difficult for him to view events from a global perspective, as he continues to read events from a more local and therefore more perplexing perspective. For the less political characters in the novel 9/11 has led to much personal devastation such as the loss of their sons to the war or captivity, even though the fictional town of Heer is thousands of kilometres away from New York. As the bird pardoner, Abdul explains:

‘All I can say is that if September’s terrorist attacks had to happen, I am sorry that they happened in my lifetime. They have destroyed me. And I live so far away from where they took place. What does Heer know about New York. or New York about Heer? They are two different worlds.’

(Aslam 132-3)

There are lighter, more nuanced references to America and the West in *The Blind Man’s Garden*, as in one scene a nurse suggests that the best way to disperse a growing mob is to suggest “that visas to Western countries are being given away in the next street.”⁹⁸ (Aslam 51) Especially arresting is Aslam’s portrayal of the American flag in the novel. A seamstress and a main character in the novel, the fastidious and devout Tara, the mother of Naheed is asked to sew together an American flag in order for it to be burned after Friday prayers as show of scorn toward American policy in the region. Tara, surprisingly is not familiar with the American flag and has to have a copy drawn for her in order to sew from. Tara’s meditations on the flag are naively touching:

Are the white and red stripes rivers of milk and wine flowing under a sky bursting with the splendour of stars?
Or are they paths soaked with blood, alternating with paths strewn with bleached white bones, leading out of a sea full of explosions?
Perhaps the blue in the flag means that Americans own all the blue in the world – [...] Do the Americans own these and all other reds?

(Aslam 126-7)

The glaring differences between first and third worlds are reflected upon once again when one of Aslam’s characters describes the difference in the exchange rate

⁹⁸ For impoverished countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, first world countries hold the promise of a better life yet Aslam is clearly poking fun at the phenomenon.

between the Pakistani rupee and the American dollar, in the following comic *and* meaningful manner: "a dollar is worth seventy-two Pakistani rupees. Do you know why? Allow me to tell you. It is because each American person loves America seventy-two times more than each Pakistani person loves Pakistan. That is why." (Aslam 197)

Judith Butler asks important questions about what it means to be human and who is considered human as America pursues The War on Terror within and without the borders of the United States. As she explains: '*Whether or not we continue to enforce a universal conception of human rights at moments of outrage and incomprehension, precisely when we think that others have taken themselves out of the human community as we know it, is a very test of our humanity*' (Butler 89-90). The very existence of "black sites" or secret torture camps that are portrayed in the novel are a sign that the humanity of the "other", in this case the mainly Muslim other, is questioned and found wanting, as illegal acts of torture and interrogation are performed towards this group. Mikal, the novel's protagonist is interned in such a black site and experiences a variety of torture and interrogation interventions including sleep deprivation, white noise, strip searches and forced nudity.

For the innocent majority of Afghans and Pakistanis in the novel "black sites" such as the one Mikal is interned in (and then released from) as well as illegal prisons such as Guantanamo Bay are sites of inexplicable extrajudicial state-sanctioned evil, cruelty and abuse. As Judith Butler and Mark Danner suggest above, the American response to the attacks of 9/11 has regrettably led to an unravelling of core American values such as justice and humanity in its war-machine, prisons and "black sites" as can be observed both in Aslam's novel and at the sites of conflict and intervention.

5.4 Pakistan as Portrayed in *The Blind Man's Garden*

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Pakistan is portrayed as a place of beauty, peace, and tranquillity as can be found in the expansive garden created by Rohan, the protagonist's father who is slowly going blind, but also as a third world, developing, and troubled nation. These two conflicting views represent the two sides of Aslam's affection for and objections to contemporary Pakistani reality. The author's ability to portray both the beautiful and the sordid in his text is testament to his distance from the daily realities of life in Pakistan via his British-based sojourn, as well as his broad literary palette enabling him to trace in wide encyclopaedic strokes varied and varying portfolios of contemporary life.

The garden that Rohan has created adjacent to his former school and now his home is a large well-planned botanical marvel with trees "ten times the height of a man" (Aslam 7), "[t]he boundary wall of the house draped in poet's jasmine, Pakistan's national flower" (Aslam 13). Rohan describes the garden, by reflecting on how it, like him seems to continue to mourn the death of his wife, Sofia even years after her passing⁹⁹:

The limes and the acacia trees seemed to mourn her, the rosewood and the Persian lilacs, the peepal and the corals, and all their different fruits, berries and spores ... Inside the earth the roots mourned her even without having seen her, and the white teak whose bark came off in plates the size of footprints, the lemon tree that produced twenty-five baskets of fruit each year.

(Aslam 49)

The house which Rohan and Sofia had built is divided into six pair of rooms named after the six centres of "Islam's bygone brilliance" are also part of the garden, with Arabian date palms surrounding Mecca House, climbing Iraqi roses curtaining Baghdad House, "Spanish almond trees and carnations" growing around Cordoba House, "Egyptian blue lotuses stand in crystal-tight arrays in a triangular pool before Cairo House," as well as a wide banyan which arches over the two rooms named after Delhi." (Aslam 21-22) Rohan has blended his faith with his love and knowledge of plants, shrubs, trees and flowers to create an artful and thoughtful blend of nature and culture.

⁹⁹ Rohan and Sofia's relationship is important to the development of the narrative and will be discussed at greater length below.

In contrast to Rohan's peaceful, tranquil, beautiful garden oasis (and former school) which represents the best of Pakistan in his melding of faith, culture and nature, there are the socio-political realities of living in a poor and developing nation beset by corruption and poverty, ethnic strife and conflict. It is this impoverished, dysfunctional, violent and corrupt Pakistan which Mikal, Rohan's foster son, calls to mind while being tortured and interrogated in the American internment camp. In response to his interrogator's laughter, Mikal feels great shame:

[F]or Pakistan and its poverty ... where the taps don't have water, and the shops don't have sugar or rice or flour, the sick don't have medicines and the cars don't have petrol, his disgusting repulsive country where everyone it seems is engaged in killing everyone else, a land of revenge attacks, where the butcher sells rotten meat to the milkman and is in turn sold milk whose volume has been increased with lethal white chemicals, and they both sell their meat and their milk to the doctor who prescribes unnecessary medications in order to win bonuses from the drug companies, and the factory where the drugs are made pours its toxic waste directly into the water supply, into rivers and streams, killing, deforming, blinding, lacerating the sons and daughters of the policeman who himself dies in a traffic accident while he is taking a bribe, an accident caused by a truck the transport inspector has taken a bribe to declare roadworthy, a country full of people whose absolute devotion to their religion is little more than an unshakable loyalty to unhappiness and mean-spiritedness

...

(Aslam 213-4)

Of course Heer and Pakistan are the only home Mikal knows¹⁰⁰ so while he feels great shame for its many incongruencies and faults, Pakistan is also the place of his fondest memories and sense of belonging. Mikal loves his land but is also attuned to its many flaws and weaknesses as he expresses under the duress of interrogation. Mikal is not especially well-educated but he has a very finely-tuned understanding for what is wrong with his country and the manner in which these wrongs are connected and self-perpetuating.

Aslam puts forth two conflicting portrayals of Pakistan which coexist side-by-side. The one view of a nation peopled by gentle loving souls who revere the land and the culture, and the other view of a nation of suffering creatures who must endure the most horrible circumstances due to the greed and corruption and ignorance and violence of many of its inhabitants.

¹⁰⁰ Mikal speaks Pashto as well as Urdu and navigates by the stars. His home is in Heer but he has formerly travelled in Afghanistan and is familiar with the region.

5.5 Sofia and Rohan: *Saddening one Another*

If there is no God,
Not everything is permitted to man.
He is still his brother's keeper
And he is not permitted to sadden his brother,
By saying that there is no God.

Czeslaw Milosz¹⁰¹

In this book, filled with stories of cruelty, injustice, bigotry and ignorance, love never steps out of the picture.

Kamila Shamsie¹⁰²

There are several love stories that interlace *The Blind Man's Garden*, the most significant of which is that between Naheed and Mikal. No less important is the memory of a love between Sofia and Rohan. Sofia passed away four days after the birth of Jeo, twenty years hence. The tragedy of her death for the faithful and long-suffering Rohan is Sofia's admission that she has lost her religious belief: " 'God is just a name for our wonder.' There was no soul, only consciousness. No divine plan, only nature." For Rohan, Sofia's admission consigns "him to decades of apprehension on her behalf, because *he* knew that the soul existed, and not only that, it was accountable to Allah and His providential rage. Unlike her he knew that the dead were not beyond harm." (Aslam 49)

In his agitated state worried about the fate of her soul, Rohan had neglected to give Sofia her medicines in the hope that she would let go of her doubts "forcing her to embrace Allah again before it is too late." (Aslam 72) In his later years Rohan regrets his actions, for of course had Sofia continued to take her medicines she might have had a chance to live longer and re-embrace her faith. Rohan dedicates his life to saving Sofia's soul and spends the next years doing his utmost, consulting religious experts to try and rescue Sofia's soul even after her death.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Aslam 155.

¹⁰² Shamsie in a review of Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, quoted in Nash 41.

In later years, Rohan reconsiders his worry on Sofia's behalf wondering if perhaps he has misjudged the situation and that God in his infinite mercy may indeed have taken pity on Sofia's soul and that she had died as one of the virtuous:

But after two decades of thought he does sometimes suspect that his conduct has resembled sin, the sin of pride. Had he really decided that Allah lacked compassion, even for an apostate? Yes, he sometimes fears that his grief at her death – and before that at her doubts and renunciation – had driven him to something resembling an offence. How can he know for certain that the area of earth that became her grave hadn't rejoiced at her death, 'adorning itself like a bride, exulting in having to embrace her soon', as the books of spiritual devotion say about the virtuous?

(Aslam 48)

Rohan's concerns for Sofia, two decades after her passing, even while they are couched in religious terms are signs of Rohan's loyalty to Sofia's memory, an abiding affection and commitment that not even death could sway. Rohan as a devout Muslim is deeply concerned with questions of faith and the afterlife and Aslam is attuned to the manner in which religiosity permeates all aspects of life and death in his characters' worldview.

Rohan and Sofia's partnership is an equal one, working together at the school they built together, both of them having attended University in Peshawar. Disagreements are common between the two, and even when he disagreed with Sofia, Rohan held her views in high regard and if not moved to change his mind on points of conflict, Rohan is nevertheless much affected by Sofia's actions and opinions. Only at the end of her life, when Sofia denounces her belief, does Rohan despair at ever healing the rifts between his wife and Allah, and of course, between his wife and himself. All other disagreements Rohan is able to accept, and it is only years later that he recognizes that Allah in his infinite mercy may look kindly upon his unbelieving wife even if strictly speaking her sin of apostasy is not forgivable.

In the years following her death, Rohan feels that the garden mourns her with him as has been quoted earlier in a stirring and evocative passage¹⁰³, and now, twenty years later:

Rohan looks out of the window, his glance resting on the tree that was planted by his wife. It is now twenty years since she died, four days after she gave birth

¹⁰³ "The limes and the acacia trees seemed to mourn her, the rosewood and the Persian lilacs, the peepal and the corals, and all their different fruits, berries and spores ... Inside the earth the roots mourned her even without having seen her, and the white teak whose bark came off in plates the size of footprints, the lemon tree that produced twenty-five baskets of fruit each year." (Aslam 49)

to Jeo. The scent of the tree's flowers can stop conversation. Rohan knows no purer source of melancholy.

(Aslam 6)

5.6 “Harming the Good People”

But a man's life blood
is dark and mortal.
Once it wets the earth
what song can sing it back?
Aeschylus¹⁰⁴

He no longer has any need to wear a wristwatch. His blindness almost coincided with the death of the two boys. They seem the same event. In the coming years when he is asked how long he has been sightless, he would ask himself how long Jeo and Mikal¹⁰⁵ have been gone.

(Aslam 232)

“History is the third parent” is the opening line of *The Blind Man's Garden*. A little ambiguous, it seems to suggest that history or perhaps fate is an important signifier of a life lived, as important as one's parentage. Equally telling is the novel's first scene which is a flashback from Jeo's childhood. Rohan remembers Jeo's agitation at being told a story:

After a few minutes, he revealed that his distress was caused by the appearance of a villain in the story he was being told. Rohan had given a small laugh to comfort him and asked,
'But have you ever heard a story in which the evil person triumphs at the end?'
The boy thought for a while before replying.
'No,' he said, 'but before they lose, they harm the good people. That is what I am afraid of.'

(Aslam 5)

Indeed *The Blind Man's Garden* combines both beauty and great sadness for the 'good' people are indeed 'harm'd' in the long first chapter titled “Footnotes to Defeat”, such that both his blindness and Jeo's death seem to Rohan to be the same event, the same tragedy, as is expressed above. At the novel's opening, Rohan, who when sighted created a marvel of a garden is already going blind, however he is in fact permanently blinded in an act of extreme cruelty by an Afghan war lord whom Rohan had offended (Aslam 146, 149). Jeo's death is ordered by Major Kyra even before he leaves from Heer to Peshawar and ultimately, Afghanistan.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Aslam 3.

¹⁰⁵ At this stage in the narrative Rohan does not know that Mikal is still alive.

Rohan cannot protect his family or his eyesight from the precariousness of war (see Butler) and the vicissitudes of fate. He like millions of others has been made vulnerable by the war in neighbouring Afghanistan and neither his values nor his good deeds (or those of his children) can protect him or his family from great loss and deep misfortune. Young Jeo is mature for his years and intuits an important lesson from the simple story he was being told about the precariousness of life.

5.7 “War is Weak after all”

People forget that "Pakistan has paid a huge price for the war in Afghanistan". Since 2001, "upwards of 30,000 people have died in terrorist, jihadi violence. That's one 9/11 every year." Of the CIA drone attacks since 2004 on northern Pakistan, "only one in 50 'surgical strikes' is killing a militant. So they're taking out husbands, wives, children as 'collateral damage'." ¹⁰⁶

Yasmin and Mikal sit side by side, their upper bodies turned in an embrace. She who has lost a brother and a husband. *They are gone but they are still here, in the hearts of those they left behind. War couldn't destroy that. War is weak after all.* He feels no consolation in such thoughts, in this sentiment.
(Aslam 349)

Is *War weak after all*? War has left Rohan's family bereft of Jeo and Basie and maybe even Mikal. Rohan who admittedly was already going blind, a process that takes years, has had his eyes deliberately blinded by an angry Afghan war lord. Yasmin has lost a brother and a husband. Naheed may never see Mikal again. How then is it possible for Yasmin, Rohan's daughter to intimate that *War is weak after all*?

In the story that Rohan was telling the young Jeo, a parable of sorts mentioned in the section above, the 'good people' triumph at the end and Aslam suggests that indeed in his story, in *The Blind Man's Garden* after much turmoil, the forces of good outlive the forces of evil. War ends, terrorists such as Major Kyra and his students are ultimately killed or arrested and the surviving learn to live again. While of course, this is true, Aslam also makes sure to show the human costs of war and of terror such as the deaths of Jeo and of Basie, Rohan's son and foster-son. Even if, therefore Aslam's narrative ends on a high note, it is not before he shows in realist terms the real costs of war and terror.

The blind man's garden continues to grow and flourish, a testament to Rohan's contribution, but he can no longer enjoy its beauty in quite the same way. The sons of Mikal and Basie are the fresh signs of a new generation but they will miss the presence of their absent fathers. *War may be weak*, as Yasmin suggests above, but it has a price, and this price is often felt for generations.

¹⁰⁶ Aslam quoted in Jaggi.

Nadeem Aslam in a 2013 review of *The Blind Man's Garden* focuses on the significance of the early scene involving the precocious young Jeo, adding with further realism that within a lifetime perhaps some tragedies cannot be overcome:

The key sentence of the entire novel is on the very first page, where Rohan tells his young son not to be frightened of the villain in a fairy tale because he will not triumph in the end. And the child understands this but worries that before the villain loses he harms the good people. How do you tell someone who has suffered from a drone attack that it's OK now because the bombings have stopped? Let's say the Taliban disappear tomorrow. How do people deal with the fact that while they were in power they killed their family member? Sometimes it can seem as if you can never get over anything in your entire life.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Aslam quoted in East.

6. Conclusion

[E]arly twenty-first century expressions of transcultural literature –by creating, recreating, interlacing and, most importantly, negotiating diverse cultural landscapes—contribute to open up new worlds, new modernities connected to the present age of global mobility, and show us the strengths and at the same time the limits and the illusory perception of a single bounded cultures/civilizations and monocultural/ monological identities.

(Dagnino 152)

The relevance of literature. The relevance of art. The relevance of culture. What literature, what art, what culture, what values? For whom for what?

(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 106)

Decolonial aesthetics reflect a perspective that broadens the canon and foregrounds works of art that take “seriously the epistemic insights of critical thinkers from the global South” (Grosfoguel *TBG*) to correct for a history that “has privileged the culture, knowledge, and epistemology produced by the West:”

So far, the history of the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system has privileged the culture, knowledge, and epistemology produced by the West (Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2000). No culture in the world remained untouched by European modernity. There is no absolute outside to this system. The monologism and monotopic global design of the West relates to other cultures and peoples from a position of superiority and is deaf toward the cosmologies and epistemologies of the non-Western world.

(Grosfoguel *TBG*)

Significantly paying close attention to “the cosmologies and epistemologies of the non-Western world,” does not in any way exclude Western cosmologies or epistemologies but as the transcultural texts, I have selected show, reflect a continuing dialogue with the West but in new ways that revoke former dichotomies such as North/South, centre/periphery and coloniser/colonised. Transcultural texts such as the two novels and the two memoirs selected for close study in this thesis show how they are set between worlds, or better yet, between cultures such that their consumption results in renewed calibrations of identity. To read such texts is to see how it is possible for conflicting (cultures) identities to not only engage in dialogue but to transform one another, as Gilles Dupuis writes:

Transculturalism ... does not limit itself to two cultures facing each other, trying to work out what they assume to be their intrinsic discrepancies. Transculturalism takes place when at least two—and sometimes three or more—cultures are not only engaged in dialogue, but partake in a more profound and often contradictory process, in which enlightenment, understanding, and continuous reassessment of identity are at play. The ultimate aim is to transform each other's identity through a long, arduous, and sometimes painful negotiation of Otherness.

(Dupuis qtd. in Dagnino 153)

Dupuis highlights three process which characterise transculturality (which exceed interculturality): an engagement between two or more cultures which extends beyond mere dialogue to include 'enlightenment, understanding, and an ongoing reassessment of identity.' *Reading Lolita in Tehran* which has been much critiqued for its neo-Orientalist stance, is nevertheless a transcultural text negotiating between literary 'worlds' such that canonical English and American works are read anew by being placed in an Iranian context. Canonical English-language works 'travel' to distant Iran and transform both the Iranian students of the text and the international audience which consumes the work. Nafisi's students are transformed by reading Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Jane Austen as is her readership by this new calibration of Western classics by an Iranian born author in a semi-fictional Iranian context. Alas, Nafisi's negotiation of 'Otherness' is enlightening when it comes to Western ways and culture and redolent of a great deal of bias and stereotype when addressing Iranian ways and culture. Nafisi's political objections to the ruling theocracy has resulted in what many critics consider a skewed portrayal of Iranian society in which she appears to argue for Western dominance over native rule in Iran.

Iran Awakening is a serious and sobering memorialisation of Shirin Ebadi's exceptional journey as judge, lawyer and prisoner in contemporary Iran to 2003 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Ebadi's transcultural text reflects her decision to publish in English, in which she is not fluent, and to publish in the United States, where as a national from an embargoed country she initially was forbidden to publish in her attempt to "correct stereotypes about Muslim women" (Ebadi, *IA* 210) and to bridge old antagonisms between Iran and the US. Ebadi's text in its unique portrayal of the workings of Iranian law from the perspective of a female judge and lawyer and in its realistic characterization of the theocracy's bias against women combined with her committed view that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within challenges

the reader to an understanding of the contradictions within contemporary Iranian society. Western readers of Ebadi's text are likely to be surprised by the contrast between the personal empowerment and the political/legal disenfranchisement of women since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Contrary to the stereotype of the hapless, defenceless female, Ebadi shows that Iranian women and Muslim women are diversified by training, education and class and portrays both the empowered and the vulnerable, resulting in a far more nuanced measure of the Muslim 'Other'. Ebadi's memoir is careful to include important historical background to contextualize the ruling theocracy as well as the roots of US-Iranian antagonism. There is little doubt that Ebadi's text informs and surprises, combining personal anecdote with political récit such that the reader is likely to be continuously reassessing his or her view of Iranian society and of gender relations in Iran.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the quintessential transcultural text. Exactly as outlined by Dupuis above, Hamid's dramatic monologue set shortly after the events of 9/11 *performs* transculturality through the "long, arduous, and sometimes painful negotiation of Otherness" (Dupuis qtd.in Dagnino 153). In a Lahore teahouse Pakistani Changez addresses a silent American interlocutor in a wordy battle of wits which may mean the demise of one or the other. Hamid's text only hints at the identity of the two men, leaving it up to the reader to decide if the bearded Pakistani is an Islamic fundamentalist or if his American listener is a CIA agent. Hamid suggests, as has been explored earlier in this essay, that it is the reader's perspective as to whether the dramatic monologue is a thriller or simply a random encounter. As a thriller, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be read as a crystallization of Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, Changez representing Islamic civilization and his interlocutor representing Western civilization. Joseph Darda's nuanced reading of Hamid's text suggests that by staging a "clash of civilizations", *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* contests "the forces inhibiting global understanding and build[ing] international coalitions *through this struggle itself*," as he explains:

[M]ore recently, scholars are beginning to theorize a global literature that goes beyond the discourses of transnationalism and canonical world literature. These scholars consider how literary works endeavour to transcend national boundaries and imagine global community. Literature can, they argue, lend narrative structure to an emerging global imaginary. But this body of work tends to focus more on a future coming-together than the ongoing warfare, inhumane detainment, and belligerent nationalism that block this imagined future. Through a reading of Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist, I thus aim to outline what could be called “critical global fiction”: literary works that contest the forces inhibiting global understanding and build international coalitions *through this struggle itself*. This literature is founded on the idea that life is not bounded and isolated but always conditioned by one’s material and social surroundings.

(Darda 108)

Set following the events of 9/11, Nadeem Aslam’s *The Blind Man’s Garden* is situated in the small fictional town of Heer in Pakistan, not far from Peshawar and the border with Afghanistan where US-led war is raging. An example of “critical global fiction” as outlined by Darda above, Aslam’s novel, a family saga, outlines the horrific consequences of war and terrorism. Ordinary Pakistanis such as Jeo and Mikal become embroiled in the war across the border and the consequences are harrowing. Aslam’s aim in this transcultural novel is to illustrate the *precariousness* of life to use Judith Butler’s term. No one is protected from the vicissitudes of fate and even the innocent are tried and tested in the most wrenching manner. Mikal, the novel’s protagonist experiences first-hand the “ongoing warfare, inhumane detainment, and belligerent nationalism that block [an] imagined [global] future” (Darda 108) and yet when the tables turn and he becomes inadvertently the aggressor and murders two of his former American captors, he does all he can to atone for his crime not advocating Hammurabi’s code but like Darda working toward his own simplified vision of peace and harmony. Mikal has no formal education and is no philosopher, but he is a decent, simple Muslim of great courage and character whom Nadeem Aslam posits as counterpoint to the militant Muslim male as he is known in the world’s media. Here indeed, is the Other, as Aslam has conjured him up, the other as hero, suggesting an alternative narrative to the “clash of civilizations”-- a world characterised by cultural antagonism expressed via hate, war, revenge, and terror. The reader is transformed by Aslam’s novel in which American and Pakistan are pitted first against each other and then *with* one another as Mikal saves the life of the brother of the American he had murdered. As unrealistic as Aslam’s novel reads at times, it is important to remember that Mikal is named after the Archangel Michael cluing the reader into the sources of Mikal’s goodness and fortitude. Identity is key to the calibrations of Aslam’s novel in which simple identity is negotiated and found wanting. Humanity supersedes identity and the novel’s hero does not favour himself or his ‘kind’ over the ‘Other’.

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ABSTRACT

'Texts between worlds' are transcultural global texts which transcend one nation, culture, continent or language. Four Anglophone transcultural works, two memoirs and two novels from South/West Asia have been selected for analysis in this study. Decolonial aesthetics reflect a perspective that broadens the canon and foregrounds works of art (and modes of thought) that feature epistemic insights from critical thinkers of the Global South (Grosfoguel). The Global identity of the English language will be examined in the context of Anglophone texts—penned in superlative English and published with great success in the metropolis—as well as its ubiquity worldwide. Transcultural literary expression highlights not only the presentation of varying modes of identity but more significantly effects the *negotiation* of identity in varying cultural contexts (Dagnino).

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books by American-based, Persian-born academic Azar Nafisi is read alongside Iranian-born Nobel Laureate and Lawyer Shirin Ebadi's memoir *Iran Awakening* to assess the varying ways each writer presents her vision of Iranian society in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by American-educated Mohsin Hamid and *The Blind Man's Garden* by UK-based Nadeem Aslam both set following the harrowing events of 9/11, are transcultural novels that depict the Pakistani Muslim male in various levels of interaction with the Western 'Other'. These two novels by British Pakistani authors bravely address issues of war, terror and fundamentalism, each in its own way concluding that there is much more which unites people between civilizations than separates them.

ABSTRACT in Deutscher Sprache

‚Texte zwischen Welten‘ sind transkulturelle globale Texte, die eine Nation, Kultur, einen Kontinent oder eine Sprache überschreiten. Vier englischsprachige transkulturelle Arbeiten, zwei Memoiren und zwei Romane aus Süd/Westasien sind zur Auswertung dieser Studie ausgewählt worden. Entkolonisierte Ästhetik reflektiert eine Perspektive, die die Grundprinzipien erweitert und die Kunstwerke (und Denkansätze) in den Vordergrund rückt, was epistemische Einblicke von kritischen Denkern des globalen Südens gewährt (Grosfoguel). Die globale Identität der englischen Sprache wird im Kontext der englischsprachigen Texte - verfasst in superlativem Englisch und mit großem Erfolg in der Großstadt publiziert - so wie in einer weltweiten Allgegenwärtigkeit untersucht. Transkultureller literarischer Ausdruck betont nicht nur die Präsentation verschiedener Identitätsmodalitäten sondern bewirkt im wesentlichen die *Vermittlung* der Identität in den unterschiedlichen kulturellen Zusammenhängen (Dagnino).

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books [*Lolita lesen in Teheran*] von der amerikanisch-persischen Akademikerin Azar Nafisi wird neben den Memoiren der iranischen Nobelpreisträgerin und Juristin Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening*, gelesen um die unterschiedlichen Sichtweisen der beiden Autorinnen aufzuzeigen wie sie ihre Vorstellung der iranischen Gesellschaft in der Folge der Iranischen Revolution von 1979 sehen. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* [*Der Fundamentalist, der keiner sein wollte*] von Mohsin Hamid, der in den USA studiert hatte und *The Blind Man's Garden* [*Der Garten des Blinden*] des in Großbritannien lebenden Nadeem Aslam, beide am Schauplatz der grauenvollen Ereignisse von 9/11, sind transkulturelle Romane, die den pakistanischen männlichen Muslim auf den verschiedenen Ebenen der Interaktion mit dem westlichen ‚Anderen‘ darstellen. Diese beiden Romane von britisch-pakistanischen Autoren behandeln die Themen Krieg, Terror und Fundamentalismus in sehr mutiger Form, jeder in seiner eigenen Art, mit der Folgerung, dass es viel mehr gibt, das die Menschen zwischen Zivilisationen verbindet als sie trennt.

Nada Abdelmoneim

Education

University of Vienna, Mar 09-present
Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, MA

University of Vienna, Mar 07-Nov 08
Diploma Studies, Department of English

American University in Cairo, Feb 97-Oct 99
Department of English and Comparative Literature, completed six courses

Princeton University, A.B. in Philosophy, Jun 93

University of Vienna, Medical School, Mar 89-Jan 91

American University in Cairo, Four semesters study as a non-degree student, 86-88

American International School, Vienna, Austria, International Baccalaureate, Jun 84

Computer Skills

High Proficiency in MS Windows, MS Office, and related IT products

Languages

English (excellent command of language)

German & French (attained advanced level in both languages)

Arabic (speak and communicate with great ease, read at introductory level)

Awards, Activities, Interests

Graduate Representative, Student Union, AUC, Spring 1989

Arab Society of Princeton, Co-founder and Vice-President

SECH Counselor, Princeton Health Services