

## **Commodification of Censorship in Iranian Writing in English**

Sanaz Fotouhi

### Introduction

When it comes to the promotion of any kind of cultural product about Iran in the West, in the recent years, one of the selling points has been an emphasis on the highly restrictive Iranian society where that book, that movie, or that idea, has been banned or censored, and its creators have been jailed. Event organizers hinge on this to fill up seats for screenings of Iranian films around the Western world; publishers heighten the sense of restriction and censorship through recurring use of the veil and other images which highlight fear and restrictions alongside suggestive titles; and even news reports draw on this idea as their headlines to pitch and sell articles. Even though in some cases the content that is presented might not necessarily reflect this censorship, or even at times, there might be a far-fetched connection between the content and the selling point, the reality is that the concept of something having been the subject of censorship or banned in Iran, has become a point for commodification for Iranian cultural products in the west.

This article, thus, examines the commodification of censorship and banning in relation to the cultural products that are emerging from and about Iran in the West. Using books written by members of the Iranian diaspora in English as an example, it highlights the often ironic emphasis where a cultural product/idea that has been oppressed, banned or censored in Iran is taken up vicariously in the West under the illusion that it has overcome that censorship/oppression by the virtue of being presented in the West, only to be read again in a definitive and biased framework that identifies it as a censored or banned piece of work. It pays attention to how the commodification of censorship offers an illusory shift in power relationship where under the guise of Western liberation, the Eastern creators feel a

sense of freedom, agency and powerfulness by being heard and seen against those oppressions that they previously faced, only with the reality being that in some ways their work and voices are ironically contributing to further emphasizing stereotypical understandings and power relations between the East and the West.

This article approaches censorship as something beyond a static concept of it as a state controlling mechanism where the state has all the power and the citizens are powerless law abiding subjects. Rather it situates censorship in relation to the more complicated concept of agonism, which “signifies that while we are always both bound and enabled by existing power relationship, we are also always potentially at odds with those relationships.” (Post 4) It thus begins by highlighting the complicated nature of censorship and restrictions in relation to cultural products and traces its continuous effect into their production, presentation and consumption in Iran and into the West. While the first part traces a general understanding of the effects of censorships in Iran and cultural producers’ response to it, the second part which focuses on the production and reception of material outside of Iran and the commodification of censorship, frames the argument through an analysis of books produced by Iranian writers in English.

### Censorship in Iran

Although obvious to mention, censorship is a universal and age old method and mechanism for certain kinds of control over public and private expression that is practiced around the world. But in a global context, during the recent centuries Iran has probably had more authoritative and censored control over the production of cultural material than other places. While detailed political and social reasons for this kind of censorship over centuries is something that cannot be dealt with here, for the scope of this article it is important to

understand the effects of this on cultural products in Iran, such as books, films, even news production, etc., at least over the last five decades or so.

While on the outside, censorship in Iran might appear as an austere control of the government over its people, its history, like anywhere else in the world, it is much more complicated and cannot be limited to only one factor. In fact one can argue that under the guise of what we call “Iranian censorship” there are multiple elements that contribute to the way cultural products have been and are produced and distributed in Iran and even abroad. As Frank Caso argues generally about censorship in the world, two leading “agents of censorship [have always been] political or religious.”(x) As we will see these two also hold true of Iran, and extend to include a kind of social, familial and even individual self-censorship. Like any other country, these types of censorships have formed in relation to Iran’s unique social and political history. Therefore, a very quick description of these censorships in Iran in response to specific socio-political events is essential for understanding and situating its complicated metamorphosis into commodification and its consequences in the Western world today.

### *Political censorship*

In recent Iranian history, political censorship can only be understood in line with certain events.<sup>1</sup> In the last century, Iran has been subject to two revolutions: the constitutional revolution of 1906 and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In between Iran was heavily exposed to British, American and Russian presences and cultures. It was this that influenced Reza Khan’s drive for Iran’s modernization in the 1930s. Inspired by Turkey’s Mustafa Kamal Atatürk, Reza Khan pushed Iran into the modern age. He saw modernization reflected in a secular society. Consequently, he attempted to replace, sometimes forcefully, religious systems with what he believed were more modern, secular ones, with the most memorable

and controversial of them being the 1936 violent anti-veiling offensive. All along, after this encounter with modernization, Iran was on its way to becoming one of the Middle East's most economically developed countries. But its economic success was at the price of the discontent of the majority of its population. While the changes introduced affected all aspects of Iranian life, including, as Ali Mirsepassi points out, "economic relations, social institutions and cultural patterns of the country," (73) what was neglected was the complex process needed to accommodate social change, particularly for the transformation of a predominantly religious society into a secular one. At the same time, the very modernization and contact with the West that Reza Khan and his son advocated brought a group of Iranians into understanding of alternative Western political thoughts and ideologies that gradually spread across Iran, highlighting the flaws and oppressions of the government.

But the Pahlavi rulers were reluctant to hear of anything that questioned their reign and consequently they left very little room for expression of discontent or the possibility of alternative political systems. Those who opposed or even announced their beliefs were dealt with harshly by the feared secret police, SAVAK, as the government ensured that these ideas were not widely spread. Consequently, any kind of cultural product, including literature,<sup>2</sup> theatre, film,<sup>3</sup> and even recordings, local or imported, that expressed any discontent or offered room for alternative thought became subject to heavy censorship. Thus, the production, re-production, distribution and possession of any type of material, that hinted at any kind of discontent or that offered any alternative ideologies to the government's was highly punishable. Everyone was aware of the lethal consequences of possession of and engagement with censored material in any form. The government made this message clear by occasionally prosecuting high-profile revolutionary cultural producers such as writers, poets, filmmakers and journalists.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the voices of any alternative political parties, as well as those who contested for change, were silenced, and censored during the Pahlavi reign.

So heavy was the state's hand on the expression of alternative political parties or belief systems that one could say this was one of the reasons for the ensuing events that led to the Islamic Revolution, an idealistic notion that began with the promise of room for the expression of what the people actually wanted.<sup>5</sup>

However, things changed after the Islamic government was established, and in fact, ironically, state and political censorship reached its apex. Soon after gaining power, the Islamic regime opted for "the reestablishment of traditional institutions and the removal of all modernist reforms." (Hoveyda 91) This included reforming the education and legal systems, and restoring religious systems, and the gradual re-veiling of women in all public places, as well as the application of strict Islamic laws on almost all personal and public aspects of Iranian citizens. Just as the previous regime had seen so, the Islamic government too, saw the expression of alternative political parties as a threat to the way it wanted to control the country. Consequently the expression of any differing thought or belief system was heavily censored. As a result, Iranians, faced with "secularist modernization on the one hand and religious orthodoxy and traditionalism on the other," (Hoveyda 1) became even more bewildered and confused. At this point, there was a heavy veil of political censorship on all aspects of life. There were defined rules "on women's dress in the street; a continued ban on music and dancing in public; there was propagandistic output of radio, television and the press", and there was "a constant fear of reprisals if they expressed their disenchantment too loudly." (Hiro 262) Also affected were minorities such as Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenians and Baha'is, who lost almost all their rights. All cultural producers and products faced stricter censorship laws as well. There was intensified censorship on anything that hinted at political and social discontent. Added to politically censored subjects were those that were deemed to be against the Islamic values of the state. Eventually, as Mahloujian argues, "this censorship extended to books on Marxism, Darwinian evolution, and anything else seen as contradictory

to religious doctrine.” Similarly there was a monitoring of other religious expressions that hinted at the political, and even of minority groups, such as the Kurds who spoke about independence, as well as anything else, even if slightly minor, that was deemed as contradictory to the state’s doctrine. While over the years the nature of this state’s political censorship has changed, now extending to other cultural products and to outlets such as the internet and social media,<sup>6</sup> this type of political censorship is one that to date affects the Iranian expression inside Iran.<sup>7</sup>

### *Religious Censorship*

While the Pahlavi’s forceful untangling of Islam from politics and the Islamic government’s subsequent co-mingling of it have politicized religious practices in Iran, religious censorship can be seen as having deeper roots in the Iranian society. In fact, one can trace religious censorship alongside the history of Islam in Iran, which had always affected politics.<sup>8</sup> Islam, which has been the dominant religion in Iran since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, has affected Iranian life on different levels. Amongst its various influences, independent of an ongoing political engagement, has been its impact on Iranian social life, particularly on gender relation, and public and private boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Based on Islamic tradition, which has gradually turned into a cultural practice, the Iranian society has, until recently, been a very gender dichotomous society, in which men belonged to the public sphere and women to the private.<sup>10</sup> In this culture, women’s domain “was a private world, where self-expression, either bodily or verbally, was confined within the accepted family circle.” (Milani 46) Within this tradition, propriety demanded that “a woman’s body be covered, her voice go unheard, her portrait never painted, and her life story remain untold.” (Milani 201) This type of censorship, which operated around the concept of veiling has historically influenced much of the production of cultural practices in Iran. For instance, the strict emphasis on the privacy of Iranian women’s

lives, upheld by the society, has meant that there is a social censorship on the expression of their private experiences. Historically, the majority of Iranian women upheld the social conventions of silence and segregation, and the censorship that went with it, because they knew that “public disclosure of any [ . . . ] aspects of a woman’s life was considered an abuse of privacy and a violation of societal taboos [ . . . ] for which punishments [ . . . ] were many and varied.”(Milani 46)

While there is no denying that the mixing of religion and politics in Iran has politicized religious censorship, especially when it comes to women’s movements, there is a kind of danger in collapsing these two without awareness and of its hyper politicization, particularly in the West, something that, as we shortly see, is greatly affecting the commodification of Iranian censorship, and can be used to justify certain policies and actions.

#### *Social, Familial and Individual Self-censorships*

The existing political and religious censorship that has historically affected all aspects of Iranian life can also be seen as contributing to a kind of social and familial self-censorship. Added to the fear of state’s response and religious propriety, and in fact influenced by these factors, Iranians have generally been very concerned with keeping a certain kind of exteriority and appearance at social and family levels by carefully self-censoring the revelation of taboo and discriminating information. Farzaneh Milani for instance goes on to argue that although censorship has always been externally imposed, gradually it has also become part of the Iranian discourse of communication. People gradually began to self-censor for fear of the consequences of revealing too much information. Emerging out of this has been a cultural tradition of strict censorship of disputes, scandals, or involvement of family members with criminal and political activities. This is why, according to Milani, proverbs such as “hefz-e aberu [to save face], Hefz-e zaher [to protect appearances], Ba

silisurat-o sorkhnegahdashtan [to keep the face red with a slap],” (209) play a central role in Iranian family dynamics, even today. This is also why the memoir or any autobiographical form that publically revealed private information about a person’s life was not a favored mode of expression in the Iranian society.

Although these practices operated mostly on the dynamics of the public/private domains, as Milani believes, “external restrictions sustained over time eventually generate[d] internal ones.” (212) Over time, this created a kind of individual/family dichotomy, a form of self-censorship that separated the individual, especially one who had been in a potentially shameful or harmful situation, from the rest of the family by a veil of silence. This means that individuals even within their family continuously self-censor their expression and experiences to protect themselves and their families from potential harm and social disgrace.

#### Deflecting and Uncensored Expressions

It is within this context, and keeping in mind these types of censorships, that cultural products emerging from and about Iran should be understood and framed. There is no denying that Iranians have seriously responded to various censorships throughout history. While on the one hand, censorship has restricted the presentation of certain kinds of ideas, hampering freedom of speech and artistic expression, on the other hand, it has also been reason for a kind of clever and creative response where cultural producers reframe and present certain censored topics and ideas within new frameworks, accepted but unseen by censors. While there is no time to delve into this in detail here, Iranian cultural landscape is brimming with double-edged productions, in all areas of artistic production,<sup>11</sup> which cleverly demonstrate creative responses that deflect various kinds of censorships. Inevitably, because these works are produced in response to a certain kind of state reinforced imposition, they become political acts, in retaliation to state control. Yet, despite this, seldom, however, are these acts



deliberately highlighted as overtly political within Iran – for the whole point of them is to deflect censorships by projecting or hinting at banned materials and ideas without appearing to do so. Often in Iran these acts go unnoticed as political by censors, ordinary and uncultured recipients. Here, overcoming censorship is usually not publically and loudly celebrated and does not necessarily add to a work's commercial or popular value. It is simply something every cultural producer has learned to do in order to project and exhibit ideas without crossing red lines. This is not to say there are not exceptions where artists deliberately and politically respond to censorships and make a point of it, such as the recent case of a few well-known filmmakers<sup>12</sup> who directly defy orders. But theirs is a different story which more often than not, could be counter-productive for their work, since they are quickly identified and prevented from reaching audiences, at least within Iran and in the legal ways anyway.

For the Iranian population producing work outside of Iran, however, there is a different story. Although still overcoming the kinds of cultural, social and individual self-censorships that exist amongst Iranians even beyond Iran, many cultural products, including books, movies, films, and even news articles, created beyond the borders, are not shy to highlight and address censored issues in Iran directly without alluding to imagery or euphemisms. Although examples of these are numerous in Persian, here I want to focus and demonstrate this through the example of books published by Iranian writers in English outside Iran. I focus on this category, for the sake of this article, aside from space constraints, is because, due to their linguistic accessibility to Western audiences, they have also played a hugely significant part in the commodification of censorship and restrictions when it comes to Iran in the West.

Here, however, before we proceed, there needs to be a quick clarification of the scope and history of Iranian writing in English and the socio-political context within which it has

emerged and is situated. Over the last three and half decades, ever since the Islamic revolution and the beginnings of Iranian mass migration, Iranian writers have published nearly two hundred books of fiction and memoir in English. Among them, Iranian women's memoirs, forming nearly one third of this body of work, have been extremely popular, with some even making it to top international best-selling lists.<sup>13</sup> As I argue elsewhere<sup>14</sup> the collective of this body of work, both on a personal and community level, could be seen as an attempt for the Iranian diaspora to overcome and address issues of migration and resettlement. The more personal ones, like the memoirs could be read as narratives of healing, of overcoming discrimination, and expressing previously unexpressed tales of imprisonment, discrimination, and various traumas the authors faced in their lives. For the more literary fictional ones they could be read as counter narratives against the grain of history, society, and even literature as an attempt to find a new platform for the expression of the Iranian experience. In its collective, put very generally, this body of work could be seen as a means for the maintenance, reconstruction and negotiation of a complicated Iranian diasporic identity. At the same time, however, as much as they are responding to their newly found circumstances, it is also true and cannot be denied that a lot of these books have emerged and exist because of the author's physical distance from Iran and the various censorships that had prevented the telling of their stories in Iran. A good example of this is the influx of women's memoirs in response to censorship,<sup>15</sup> as well as narratives from political activists, and people of minority backgrounds, some of which have become extremely popular.

But, as Gillian Whitlock reminds us in her analysis of Middle Eastern life narratives in particular in the recent years, including Iranians, in her seminal book *Soft Weapons*, the interest, production and consumption of these books are far from innocent, and are closely tied to socio-political events in a Western context, and are in fact framed and re-framed according to the context into which they are emerging. While Whitlock talks about the

commodification of Middle Eastern women's life narratives in light of post 9/11, here I want to narrow this focus specifically tracing the commodification of censorship and restrictions in Iran, and its effects, on Iranian narratives in English since 1979 to date alongside various social and political events in the West.

### Tracing Commodification of Censorship

It is interesting that if we trace the emergence of Iranian narratives in English, so far, they have come in three waves, all of which coincide with a major political and social event involving Iran or the general Middle East and the West. The mapping of this body of work and the changing nature of its representation – particularly in relation to an emphasis on repression and censorship in Iran - against political and social events also highlights the shifting nature of commodification of censorship in relation to these books, the effects of which I will examine later in this article.

The first wave of narratives by Iranian writers in English began to appear in a decade full of turmoil both internally within Iran and in its relation with the world. Books by Iranian writers in English began to appear soon after the revolution in the 1980s, at the beginnings of Iranian mass migration to other countries as the result of domestic unrest, at the height of America's hostility with Iran over the hostage crisis in Tehran, and during the war between Iran and Iraq. Their appearance, aside from coinciding with major clashes between Iran and the world, and the onset of a hostile regime which was beginning to close its doors tightly to the rest of the world, also overlapped with already existing stereotypical historical perceptions about the Middle East, including Iran.

As we know, the Middle East has always historically been understood by the Western world in relation to its exoticism and general inaccessibility, with its veiled women oppressed under patriarchal rules, fitting what Edward Said defines as Orientalism. Iran, or Persia as it

was known, has been no exception. Even early narratives about Persia, while describing it in Orientalist terms, as a land that “had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, [and] remarkable experiences,” (Said 15) still hinted at a sense of Western superiority. This is particularly evident in descriptions of Iranian women. In most representations, women, who occupied a separate territory, out of the Western male narrator’s gaze, remained an enigma. Westerners, who were both “fascinated and repelled by the veil” and by the situation of women, created the assumption and convention that “veiled women were necessarily more oppressed, more passive, more ignorant than unveiled women”, which led to “exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in “the Orient.”” (Mabro3)

It is within this social, political and historical backdrop that the first Iranian books in English emerged. Not so coincidentally, the first of these were women’s memoirs and they included Cherry Mostesher’s *Unveiled: Life and Death Among the Ayatollahs* (1995) and Sousan Azadi’s *Out of Iran: One Woman’s Escape from the Ayatollahs* (1988), both of which recount the difficult lives of the narrators in Iran during the revolution and its aftermath and their eventual exile. Here, only through an examination of the covers of these two books, both of which use an image of a chador clad woman, and completely disregarding their content, we begin to see a direct relationship between the representation of repressive and censored lives of women in Iran and the commodification of this idea as a selling point in relation to the specific period in which the books were being published.

If we break down the titles, they are latently loaded words that hint at the repression and restrictive Iranian society that these women have left behind. The word *Unveiled* emphasizes a kind of freedom for the narrator from the repressive veil and also promises an exotic entry for the reader into the censored and previously unknown world of Iranian women.

The subtitle *Life and Death Among the Ayatollahs*, at the same time hints at the urgency of this woman's narrative under one of the most repressive groups of leaders back then: the Ayatollahs. Similarly, *Out of Iran* combined with the subtitle *One Woman's Escape from the Ayatollahs* hinges on the same concepts of gained freedom from repression and censorship.

Complementing the messages of the titles are the cover images. Mosteshar's cover is an all-encompassing black, with only the eyes of a woman staring, not directly at the reader but into a distant horizon. This face is mocked with makeup. Bright blue eye shadow on the eyelids and comical brush strokes on the black represent blush and a bright stroke of red to mark lipstick, create a kind of fantasy under the chador, in a way creating a kind of uncensored expression of freedom. While Mosteshar's plays on the concept of un-censoring and unveiling, Azadi's reminds the viewer of the repressions and restrictions that exists for women in Iran. Here, unlike the made up face, an Iranian woman with a very plain and stern face almost totally covered, except for her nose, with a chador, very seriously carries a rifle in her hand in what may be a parade of some kind. Behind her another chador covered figure, with her face showing but without the hint of any emotion stares down, avoiding direct eye contact with the camera. This image of these women brings to mind and highlights the strict society in which Iranian women live.

Such images, appearing at a time when Iran's doors were completely shut to the outside world, reinforced Western imaginations of Iran. While Mosteshar's cover represents the West's belief of the hidden desire of women to look beautiful and wear makeup in Iran, something that they assume is not possible, Azadi's seems to hint at the way the tyrannical regime (represented by the rifle the woman is holding) has taken away any kind of life in the women's all hidden and emotionless face. Both images, combined with the titles, use the idea of Iranian women's restrictions and imposed censorships through veiling as a selling point.

While the 90s saw the trickling of a few books by Iranian writers in English, the second major wave emerged right after 9/11. With America's declaration of "war on terror," Iran's newly earned position within the "axis of evil," and the debates surrounding women's rights and liberations in the Middle East, once again, there was a new kind of interest in narratives from Iran and the general Middle East, particularly in women's first person accounts. More than any other time in Western history, there was now an active interest for Western readers to know about silenced and censored voices and narratives, and the seemingly grave kinds of oppression that was going on in the Middle East. Once again, an emphasis on these concepts was clearly used as a selling point when it came to books by Middle Eastern writers or about the Middle East, including Iran. This was clearly reflected in the framing of these books.

If we look at the body of books that emerged after 9/11<sup>16</sup> by Iranian writers as the number of them increased dramatically, there is a clear emphasis on censorship, imprisonment and silences in Iran starting from their very covers. Soon, the half veiled face of a woman of Middle Eastern appearance became the poster child of most narratives by Iranian writers,<sup>17</sup> especially on women's memoirs. Combined with titles such as *Living in Hell* (2004), *Journey from the Land of No* (2004), *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), *My Prison, My Home* (2009), *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been* (2006), *We Lived to Tell* (2007), *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007), *Camelia: Save Yourself by Telling the Truth* (2007), *My Life as a Traitor* (2008), and *Under a Starless Sky: A Family's Escape from Tehran* (2008), these books place a great latent emphasis on the concept of censorship, silence and escape as a selling point. While during this period, there was also a number of successful fictional narratives by Iranian women, as well as a few memoirs and fictional books by Iranian male writers, it is worthwhile to note that women's memoirs, most of which were framed and marketed in the above context, received by far the most attention.

While books framed in this way continued to pop up on international shelves, there was a clear shift with the onset of a third wave, which coincided with major historical event: the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections in Iran and the global awareness about Iran's human rights problems against political prisoners through social media, as well as Iran's raised presence in international news headlines due to nuclear talks. But now, thanks primarily to digital and social media<sup>18</sup> there was a turning point in the way Iran was viewed in the West, and this inevitably affected the kinds of narratives that began to emerge, as well as the way they were framed.

Soon after the protests broke out following the contested presidential elections, there was a rapid circulation of clips, photos, and posts, about what was happening on the ground. Suddenly an Iran came into view which was very different to the one previously imagined. Here, women were no longer silent, passive and domestic. Rather, they were fighting alongside men in opposition to the government. As the world witnessed through these new images, women such as Neda Agha Soltan, who was shot in the street and died on camera, suffered alongside men for the violation of their rights as humans at the hands of the government.

Out of the ashes of these events, a new interest was born in Iran. The world was no longer interested in delayed stories by silenced and oppressed diasporic women. Rather, everyone wanted to know what was going on in Iran right now. For the first time since the hostage crisis, the Western world began to understand and distinguish between the Iranian people and its government, and they began to realize other internal turmoils of the country, especially on issues of human rights, extending to both men and women political prisoners, their situation, oppression and severe censorships that were affecting them.

Now, replacing women's silenced and censored narratives was an interest in political and prisoner accounts. This reflected in the kinds of books that began to be published by the Iranian diaspora, and the way they were framed. One of the major shifts here has been the huge increase in the number of male narratives, especially from journalists or ex-prisoners. Yet, as we will see, while a shift exists in the kinds of narratives, there is a continuation of emphasis on censorship, imprisonment and restrictions as a selling point.

Without going into much detail about the content of these books, (which seems to become irrelevant when it comes to the way they are framed and presented,) for instance, since 2009 we have seen the publication of a prominent journalist, Maziar Bahari's *Then they Came for Me: A family's Story of Love, Captivity and Survival* (2011); Reza Ghafari's *A State of Fear: My 10 years Inside Iran's Torture Jails* (2011), *The Gaze of the Gazelle* (2011) the memoir of Arash Hejazi, the man who filmed and uploaded Neda Agha Sultan's tragic death onto YouTube and a prominent publisher in Iran whose publishing house was shut down by the government, Reza Khalili's *A Time To Betray: The Astonishing Life of a CIA Double Agent Inside Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (2010), Kooshyar Karimi's *I Confess: Revelations in Exile* (2012) about an Iranian-Jewish doctor's harassment and harsh working conditions in Iran, Siavash Khorsandi's *Out of Iran: My Journey through Revolution and Life* (2013), and Houman Majd's *The Ministry of Guidance Invites You To Not Stay: An American Family in Iran* (2013). Interestingly enough, during this period there appears to have been a gradual decline – or less emphasis placed – on memoirs by Iranian women as we see only a few books, particularly memoirs, by women writers.<sup>19</sup> Here one can only name Rostampour and Amirzadeh's *Captive in Iran: A Remarkable True Story of Hope and Triumph amid the Horror of Tehran's Brutal Evin Prison* (2013) which recounts the stories of two Christian converted women in Iran, and Neda Sotan's *My Stolen Face: The story of a Dramatic Mistake* (2012) which recounts one woman's identity mistake with the Neda Soltan who was



shot during the protests, as well as Nazia Fathi's *The Lonely War: One Woman's Account for the Struggle of Modern Iran*(2014) which recounts her life and threats she received as a journalist in Iran.

Not surprisingly there has also been a shift in the images used on the cover of these books. After the events of 2009, no longer are we seeing an emphasis on censorship and repression in Iran reflected through the half veiled face of women. Rather, now there is a range of images most of which depict violence, and imprisonment. For example, to examine a few, the cover of Maziar Bahari's *Then They Came for Me* is an image of a citizen being choked from behind and pulled by what appears to be some kind of a police in uniform. Reza Ghafari's *A State of Fear: My 10 years Inside Iran's Torture Jails*, depicts a sense of imprisonment through a man's hand holding onto barbed wiring. Arash Hejazi's *Gaze of the Gazelle* has a silhouette of a woman's hejab with dots seeping through, a seemingly violent abruption to a woman's existence. Some, like Reza Kahlili's *A Time To Betray*, use a politically charged image of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad set against the backdrop of Iranian and American flags which indicates a sense of repression and censorship created by Iran's then President. These images and titles, appearing at a time when Iran was on the news continuously for its horrid human rights conditions, albeit very differently to the way books of the previous wave were framed, clearly highlight the existing sense of oppression and censorship as a selling point. As I am writing this article in mid 2015, we are seeing the continuation of a similar kind of framing by most books by Iranian writers in English.

### Problems

On the surface of it, the popularity of Iranian narratives in the West, framed in a way that appeals to a buying market through an emphasis on censorships and oppressions, could be seen as somewhat beneficial. After all, it is every writer's dream to gain public attention and

sell great number of copies. But, this pattern which might get books flying off the shelves because readers pick them up to learn about the oppression and censorship that is going on in Iran, is riddled with all kinds of socio-political and ideological problems, that is inherently repeating a vicious cycle of oppression in a new framework.

If we look at the body of work by diasporic Iranian writers, many are written at the junction of seemingly found new kinds of freedoms from the censorships and oppressions that prevented their expression in Iran. For the writers, this has all kinds of personal and political implications that work towards them regaining a sense of agency from the traumas, oppressions and censorships that they suffered in Iran, as well as finding a new sense of self in their host communities. As we know there is a lot scholarship exploring the inherent link between narration and regaining of a sense of self in the face of having lost agency and a sense of identity. Writing, especially autobiographically, opens up a space for healing and recognition, and consequently for a regaining of a sense of subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> For many Iranian writers, too, writing is a very personal journey which inherently provides them with a regained sense of subjectivity and agency, both in relation to untold and censored events of their past, and in establishing themselves in their new settings as speaking subjects.

But a problem occurs here when the commodification of the concept of censorship and restrictions in Iran, reframes their narratives from personal accounts and labels it within a certain pre-existing framework. As Mammad Aidani puts it particularly in relation to the Iranian experience, “human agency is a very significant factor in which these Iranians express their own stories. There is a deep sense of need for demonstrating their autonomy, which they feel has been ignored, devalued and undermined.” (19) If we look at the content of many of the texts mentioned above, there is an underlying emphasis on regaining this sense of subjectivity both in relation to Iran, and the host country into which these writers are settling.

In the case of Iranian writers that their narratives are situated and read within the meta-textual framework of “censored” or “oppressed” narratives from the Middle East, strips down any kind of personal and individual agency the writers might have gained through the process of writing. This is not only so because labelling or categorizing is inherently an oppressive process which gives the one categorizing the power to oversee individuality to begin with, but also because the kinds of categorizations into which they are being placed are already loaded with binary oppositions. When these texts are picked up in the West and read as narratives of those who have been freed from censorships and oppressions in Iran, by the virtue of writing in the West and being read by Western audiences, it continues to maintain a sense of Western superiority. While beyond doubt, writing as Stephen Kaufman believes, provided Iranian writers with “the opportunity to tell their own stories, [by] taking advantage of new freedoms and an increased feeling of comfort in their new societies” these frameworks continue to repeat the existing cycles within the society into which they are received. As Amireh and Majaj put it in their complaint about the interest in Middle Eastern women’s narratives, “our identities [. . .] served to silence us at a time when we most felt the need to speak.” (2)

Added to this is also a hyper politicization that surrounds these texts and the way they are framed.<sup>21</sup> Looking back at the body of Iranian writing in English, it was established that its gradual emergence has coincided with major political and historical events. At every step, particularly after the events of 9/11 and 2009, these texts have been used to emphasize certain beliefs about the Middle East and Iran and read within a context which even justifies political decisions and policies of intervention when it comes to dealing with the Middle East. These could be used as examples to justify political and social intervention to save the people from the oppression under which they live.

## Conclusion

It appears that in publication, at least in the traditional sense where publishers and gatekeepers are in control of many aspects of production, the writers do not have much choice when it comes to the way books are framed as commodities. Although over the last decade or so the rise of online and self-publications has given authors much more freedom over content and marketing, we still have a good while to go before their powers are completely redeemed. In the meantime, given this condition, where in a way we are seeing new kinds of censorships of truths, of half told truths for the sake of publicity, commodified, shaped and re-shaped, and adjusted to the desires of the market, the only thing that can be done is for us to become more critical readers and literary citizens. This does not mean banning or boycotting books that are framed within a certain frame work with which we disagree, but rather instead picking up these books, and reading them against the grain of the frame into which they are placed. This type of reading, by understanding that books and the issues around them, are a commodity, to some degree, at least does not allow for the total reconstruction of the oppressive repetitive cycles. Rather it offers, even if a glimmer of hope, for freeing those voices from already existing frameworks, and seeing their value for what they truly offer.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For a very interesting and interactive analysis and a brief history of censorship in Iran, specifically as demonstrated through its effect on publication and writing, see Writer's Block <http://www.smallmedia.org.uk/writersblock/>. Similarly, for another brief historical analysis of this topic see Azar Mahloujian's "Phoenix from the Ashes."

<sup>2</sup> Clause V. Pedersen traces the history of pre-revolutionary Iran in his book *World View in Pre-Revolutionary Iran* paying special attention to censorship in chapter 4 "Re-Establishing Reality." For a more general history that also incorporates the effects of censorship in Iranian literature see, Kamran Talattof's *The Politics of Writing in Iran* and Hassan Kamshad's *Modern Persian Prose Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief analysis of early censorship in Iranian cinema refer to Shahin Parhami's "Iranian Cinema: Before the Revolution."

<sup>4</sup> Here one can think of writers such as Bahman Behrangi whose book *The Little Black Fish* brought him to the attention of the authorities. When the young writer went missing and his body was floating in a river, there was no doubt that it was a deliberate act by the SAVAK. Similarly, there was Khosrow Golsorkhi, a poet, who was given a live broadcasted court hearing. Although the feed was cut off when he began to defend himself with his ideological beliefs, nonetheless, he was sentenced to death. These were deliberate public presentations by the government to create fear in the people so they would not rebel.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of the complicated relationship between modernization and Western ideologies and Islam leading eventually to the Islamic Revolution see Ali Mirsepassi's *Intellectual Discourses and the Politics of Modernization*.

<sup>6</sup> Internet censorship in Iran has been rated as one of the worst in the world. See for example, Simourgh Aryan et al.'s report "Internet Censorship in Iran: A First Look." Kyle Bowen and James Merchant also examine the state of internet in Iran in "Internet Censorship in Iran."

<sup>7</sup> What also needs to be added here is the heavy censorship on television content. While Iranian state sponsored and even private channels are strictly controlled, the government controls the use of popular satellite dishes which many people use to receive overseas channels and information.

<sup>8</sup> Although highly political in its motives, the history Islamic censorship in Iran can be traced back to the Arab invasion where according to Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub in his Farsi book *Do Gharn Sokout (Two Centuries of Silence)* it led to a kind of censorship and silencing of the kinds of narratives and voices that were allowed to be presented in Persian as the rulers wanted to ensure Arabic as the dominant language.

<sup>9</sup> Here I am not trying to disassociate politics and Islamic influence from each other in Iranian society, for that is almost impossible since even acts such as the dichotomy of the male/female spheres which have a religious rooting are arguably heavily political. Rather, I just want to distinguish the two here to clarify and emphasize how the source of some of the later personal and familial beliefs and censorships derived from the heavy influence of Islamic thought.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting analysis of the historical reasons for this kind of private/public dichotomy in the Muslim world, refer to Elizabeth Thompson's "Public and Private in the Middle Eastern Women's history."

<sup>11</sup> The topic of how censorship has made for a creative outlet is a lively one amongst scholars, particularly on its effect on cinema. There are numerous studies done on this topic globally. For instance for a brief but concise

analysis of the topic refer to Sakina Shakil's "Iranian Film Industry Thrives amid Continuing Censorship." See similarly Rosa Holman's "Caught Between Poetry and Censorship." For a more detailed analysis see Negar Mottahedeh's *Displaced Allegories*, and Shahab Esfandiary's *Iranian Cinema and Globalization*.

<sup>12</sup> This has been the case for the likes of Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rassoulaff. But for them, these are intentional actions to get a political message across, even at the cost of their imprisonment and banning in Iran. While in some of the works I will analyse later in this article, the authors and producers may not intentionally set out to use this point as leverage themselves – publishers and publicists often do this for them – people like Panahi and Rassoulaff are aware of the exact kind of commodification of censorship and banning that surrounds their work, and they draw on it intentionally to get their message across beyond Iran. Elsewhere in *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora*, I examine the possibility of contribution of cultural producers to self-orientalization. But here, due to space constraints, I am only concerned with the framing of work by publishers and Western promoters, not the authors or cultural producers themselves.

<sup>13</sup> In "The Memoir – 'Double-Edged' Narratives," in *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora*, I trace the reasons for the popularity of the memoir and the various reasons for its popularity in relation to the memoir form and what it offers readers and writers.

<sup>14</sup> This forms the overall argument of *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora*.

<sup>15</sup> I examine the relationship between censorship and the rise of Iranian women's memoirs in detail in "Silenced Lives: Censorship and the Rise of Diasporic Iranian Women's Memoirs in English," in *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary* (2015a).

<sup>16</sup> For a complicated and interesting analysis of the historical and political context and its relation to the increase of narratives about the Middle East, see Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons*.

<sup>17</sup> I refrain from a detailed examination of the covers and their shifting nature in this article because I examine them in detail in "Changing the Cover Page: Shifting the Representation of Islamic Republic of Iran."

<sup>18</sup> Although I can't delve into the huge significance of digital and social media here in this shift, its importance should not be overlooked. For a detailed analysis of the importance of digital and social media in Iran see Negar Mottahedeh's *#iranelection* as well as Niki Akhavan's *Electronic Iran*, and Rafiehzadeh and Alimardiani's "The Political Evolution of the Iranian Internet."

<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, it has to be mentioned that Iranian women writers have been publishing a lot literary fiction that has been highly successful during this period. For instance Porochista Khakpour published *The Last Illusion* (2014), Gina Nahai *Luminous Heart of Jonah S.* (2014) just to name a few. However, while the content of some of this fiction might be about the situation of Iran, not a lot of emphasis has been placed on the literary

fiction, perhaps because literary fiction has its own selected audience who may not be persuaded as easily as those who read popular fiction or in this case these memoirs which are aimed at general audiences.

<sup>20</sup> In *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora*, I examine in detail the close ties between Iranian women's memoirs, and in the way the memoir form operates to offer a space for gaining of a sense of subjectivity and agency in relation to the traumas and oppression they faced in their home and host countries.

<sup>21</sup> There is a lot of debate about this on Iranian women's memoirs and the kind of political implications. One of the most controversial of these debates has been around Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Various scholars (Bahramitash 2005; Burwell 2007; Dabashi 2006; DePaul 2008; Donadeh & Ahmed-Ghosh 2008; Kulbagah 2008; Rastegar 2006; Rowe 2007) have interpreted that her book could be read as directly feeding into the political context and advocating attacks against the Middle East.

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Sanaz Fotouhi

Monash University

[sanaz.fotouhi@monash.edu](mailto:sanaz.fotouhi@monash.edu)

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