

All Of Her Words: Iranian Film and Individual Female Identity by Melissa Crowder

Psychologically, the ability to speak of oneself as separate and distinct is crucial to seeing oneself as separate and distinct from the mass of humanity. If one is never “I”, one never really becomes a person. An assertion of self is very significant in identity formation and maintenance. Though much has been written regarding the re-assumption of female gaze in Islamic female writing, in order to make a woman subject and not object, the first step is an assertion of subjecthood in the most basic grammatical sense – one must first become an “I”, which will then allow for the assumption of female space for that “I” to inhabit. Iranian filmmaker Tahmineh Milani demonstrates a way to gain female space through the resumption of the individual “I”, through its most personal and private revelation – the diary. The protagonist in Milani’s film *The Hidden Half* uses a diary to introduce herself to her husband. Iranian-American professor Azar Nafisi’s popular work *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a memoir, much like a diary, and with it she introduces herself and her class to her readers. However, what is most important is most simple – these diaries introduce the women, be it to their husbands, to the world, or to themselves, or to a tradition and history of female “I”s of which they are the latest generation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a religiously imposed government and community. In the writings of Nafisi and Reza Aslan, it seems to be a hybrid of theocracy and fascism, due in great part to the fear, anger, and paradoxical apathy of the citizens. In her essay “The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of,” Nafisi asserts “that [after the 1979 revolution] ordinary Iranians, both men and women, inevitably began to feel the presence and intervention of the state in their most private daily affairs” (“Dreams” 6). What she indicates is an alarming reality in which dystopic fiction has come true – home is no longer home, no longer familiar. Words such as “Muslim,” “woman,” and “Muslim woman” have been destabilized and redefined according to the regime. Jan Goodwin identifies the power structure inherent in this brave new world, asserting that “the Islamists recognize what Machiavelli and Plato understood: religion can be used to legitimize power” (8). Since religion legitimizes power and power legitimizes religion, innocent individuals are in a position of being defined. They have lost the ability to define themselves as “I” and are instead defined by the regime as ‘you.’ This creates a crisis of identity, one in which any slippage between the identity prescribed and the true identity is seen as aberrant. Regardless, individuals remain who do not fit the mold, individuals who still attempt to find and create themselves as individuals outside the norms set forth by writing themselves into existence.

Milani’s film *The Hidden Half* focuses on one woman, Fereshteh, and on the events that shaped her as a young woman in Tehran. In the present, she is a married woman with children, a woman her husband considers a feminine ideal, but Fereshteh feels she harbors a dangerous secret about herself. As a young woman, she was active in a Communist group. She has a good reason for fear as many of her comrades have disappeared into Iranian prisons or died. She fell in love with a handsome older man, publisher Roozbeh Javid, who introduced her to Iranian literary society. Despite age and class differences, as well as the cultural taboos of dating in Iran, Fereshteh pursues the relationship, which ends when she meets Roozbeh Javid’s wife. In her flight from Javid and from the Iranian officials searching for her, Fereshteh finds employment caring for an elderly lady whose son is in America. That son, Khosroo, later becomes Fereshteh’s husband, though he does not know the details of her past. Fereshteh writes a diary which she reveals this hidden half of herself, though she does not reveal it to her husband. After hearing of the plea of a woman very similar to her, a woman facing death in prison, Fereshteh gives her diary to her husband. The diary is the center of the film – the details of Fereshteh’s youth are told in flashbacks. She reaches a conclusion in which she asks her husband to look at her life as didactic. Fereshteh acknowledges at the beginning of the film that it is unusual for her to assert herself in this way, but she asserts a strong first person narration throughout. By speaking “I”, Fereshteh asserts a personhood for herself and for the unnamed female prisoner.

Iranian mythology and religious history speak of many strong female “I”s. The heroines of the post-Revelation world include the aforementioned Khadija, to Muhammad’s later wives. His wives were notable critics, advisors and Koranic interpreters, and some of them rode with him into battle¹. A powerful

¹ Because of the different alphabets, there is no standard English spelling for Islam’s holy text. I will use the spelling “Koran” throughout; however, quoted material I use may contain the alternate spelling Quran.

mythical woman predates these ancient modern Muslim women, one who was alive because she was an imaginative, courageous storyteller. The narrator and overarching protagonist of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade, predates Muhammad's wives. In this fantastic set of tales the most amazing is the frame story of the storyteller herself, Scheherazade. This storytelling woman, Scheherazade, saves her own life, as well as the lives of other women by telling stories for one thousand and one nights until she manages to change her husband's mind about women, and then change the law of the land. Scheherazade used words to create a safe space for her to inhabit, a space where she is able to speak freely. Instead of creating physical space, Scheherazade created intellectual space, which in turn became physical space. She maintained control of her own mind, and later used that mind and her creativity through her storytelling to reclaim physical space, her physical body. In this manner, Iranian writers who reclaim intellectual space are taking the first step to reclaiming their physical space. They are reclaiming intellectual, emotional, and psychological space for themselves, following in the tradition of Scheherazade and spinning tales to keep themselves alive.

Scheherazade's stories are fascinating, but her story is what is most compelling; likewise, the stories told in *The Hidden Half* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* pale beside the ultimate story of their writers. Nafisi's text is many things, and its many facets make it all the more compelling. Literary, social, and political criticism combine with autobiography to create a many-layered work which mirrors the many facets of fiction. As a memoir, it is an important work because it is a proclamation of self which demonstrates what could have been and very nearly was an obliteration of self. By writing her own memoir, reclaiming her "I", Nafisi defies those who wrote her and instead writes herself. She describes the circumstances of the 1979 revolution from both an intellectual and personal point of view, limning the illogical and incomprehensible events and circumstances with her feelings about the matter. By taking away her professional confidence and later her position as a female professor, the regime created sufficient instability within her to place strain on her family, which in turn placed more strain on her professionally. Because her individuality was being erased by her new definition as a Muslim woman, she often wondered if she was becoming "irrelevant" (169). Nafisi gives words to this lowest point by telling her readers how she questioned and doubted herself, asking the plaintive question: "Do I exist?" (168). With this question, she gives credence to a regime that would have erased her by doubting her very being. Nafisi's memoir, published years later, allows for a certain distance from the events told, events which were certainly traumatic at the time. Her memories of that revolutionary time take on a depth of meaning that the experience may not have held when lived because of underlying fear:

A stern ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher-king . . . had formulated an ideal of me . . . as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, act and in short live according to the ideal. Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance but an existential one. (165)

Nafisi claims an "unselfing" by the regime in this excerpt, an obliteration of "Azar Nafisi" by the standard Iranian Muslim woman created by the regime and placed over every woman regardless of fit. Her recognition of herself as a stranger, her identification of her resistance as "existential," makes the writing of her memoir all the more important, as writing her self, writing "I", means existing at all in this instance.

There is a recurrence of the diary or memoir form in Islamic women's writing which is an interesting way to straddle the sharply divided public and private worlds in many Islamic countries. A diary is a private document, a way to express one's thoughts and ideas in a forum which is normally only for the self; however, simply by arranging one's thoughts and ideas into a written document makes the possibility of another's reading it all the more likely. Writing a diary is always an act of desiring to be read by others, an act of desiring publication and readership on a personal level, because if one truly desires privacy and secrecy, one would not create a document that could be found. In Islamic countries where women are often enshrouded in the "private" sphere, a diary is a safe step toward the outside world, toward an area of free circulation, and a bold movement toward being known. A diary limns the private and the public spheres. As a "veiled" text, a diary offers a layer between a writer and the outside world while at the same time making that writer exposed and vulnerable. The diary is also a reflection on the state of the oppressed writer, who must step away from her own art in order to create it. It is as though they tell one story in order to tell another. A diary within the confines of a fictional work, such as *The Hidden Half*

allows for a modicum of security by allowing the author or filmmaker to take another step from the immediacy of her text. Writing feminist manifestos would be dangerous and so writing fiction has been a way for Islamic feminists living in Islamic countries to express their ideas. A diary within that fiction allows for a greater degree of separation from the work, as now the ideas and judgments are expressed by a character within the work and not the author. This allows for the author to be separated from the narrator in a situation which is resonant of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

If being an “I” defines a woman as the most dangerous of assertive females in Islamic tradition, then that tradition is defied because of the utilization of the first-person narrative or diary form. Within the realm of *Hidden Half*, the assertion of this I is the act which is both freeing and redemptive for the female protagonist. In *The Hidden Half*, Fereshteh’s husband uses the term “saar beh rah,” “a . . . term indicating that she is unmanageable and stands beyond the pale of acceptable norms of female conduct” to define the female prisoner he is going to interview² (Scullion 6). Though he uses the term to contrast the “bad” woman against his angel wife, Fereshteh’s husband has also unwittingly applied it to her. By standing outside of the norms imposed upon her, Fereshteh begins to define her own norms, to define what acceptable behavior is both for themselves and for their treatment by those around them; but this defiance she stands outside the texts as well as within. Milani has created a feminist text within a feminist text – her main character asserts an individual “I” as the creator asserts a collective “I.”

Milani’s film seems to parallel Nafisi’s text not only with her use of a diary form, but also with her assertion to individual rights. Though individual choices are stifled in the film, but Milani chooses not to focus on what is lost, but what is to be gained from the experience. Milani examines judgment, a lesson in which circumstances and context come into play. No one rule works for everyone, an idea much against the grain of the totalitarian regime in Iran. Fereshteh begins to discover this as a young girl working in her communist group, and later hears it from the lips of her brooding hero, Roozbeh Javid: “No two lives are similar. And there isn’t any specific formula for love and life to be applied equally to all” (Milani). This clear assertion of individuality over the collective is at the heart of *The Hidden Half*, as the crux of the difference between the regime’s view of an individual and the individual’s self-view. The problematics of judgment come into play with this identity crisis, as one individual cannot know another, cannot judge another, without true knowledge of the person. Fereshteh judges Roozbeh Javid quickly, only discovering that she may not have had all the information at the end of the film when he finds her and admonishes her for her hasty judgment:

But dear lady, you judged too soon and you weren’t a good judge. You only listened to the complainant. The accused never had the opportunity to defend himself. The things you were told weren’t the entire truth. But we can’t do anything now. (Milani)

Both simple and fatalistic, Javid’s farewell functions as the last piece of the education Fereshteh’s turbulent life affords her before she hides her diary in her husband’s suitcase, placing everything else that she had been through in a context which allowed a great compassion and wisdom to be born in her. This most important message in Milani’s film is that it is easy to judge, but to be just, we must hold off judgment until we have heard both sides. Out of this encounter with her former love, Fereshteh draws not only the insight but the courage to reveal those facets of her life which may seem unfavorable to her husband, and to place them within a context of forgiveness, mercy, and love, saying:

Think well. If you didn’t know the whole story and someone told you that your wife had been with a man she loved twenty years ago, what would you think? You always called me a good and honest woman. My darling, I owe all this goodness to my past. The period that I passed, with all its difficulties, helped me to know life deeply, not superficially. If I wrote all this for you, it was so you could help a woman whom you believe isn’t ‘easy.’ Maybe she was convicted by unfair societal rules, and not for a real crime. She could have been me, Zohreh, or Farkhondeh. I beg you to go and listen to her words, to all of her words.

² Anglicized Farsi rendered by Rosemarie Scullion.

Fereshteh asks her husband to not jump to conclusions and instead of hear the female side, an act which has more ramifications than are originally evident. By hearing the female prisoner's story, Khosro acknowledges her uniqueness and chooses to disregard the definition of her that the regime has superimposed. Furthermore, Khosro allows the prisoner to place her story into a context, to tell the story of her whole life, which again shows a great deal of respect for the individual. The implications of Milani's emphasis on context are as controversial as her emphasis on egalitarianism and feminism – if a story is in context, then the actions of an individual may have a cause, may be understandable and defensible.

In addition to its messages concerning independent thinking and fair judgment, Milani's film presents many conflicting and controversial views, most of which come from the lips of the others around the impressionable young Fereshteh. This constructs a plurality within the film text, a conversation which Milani shows her viewers in order to underline the importance of a dialogue, of argument and counter-argument. When we first see him, Roozbeh Javid is engaged with a group of intellectuals discussing society, politics, and individual rights. The leader of the communist group Fereshteh joined at university, Nasrin, offers the official advice on romantic love; and through Javid, Fereshteh makes the acquaintance of Ms. Pahlevan, an intellectual whose writings are published by Mr. Javid and who is apparently a political activist who has spent time in prison for her beliefs. Within the communist group, time in prison is seen as a badge of honor, conferring power and wisdom which may not have been earned, upon the individual. By showing the assumption of status, however arbitrary, within the confines of a communist group, Milani reveals the inevitability of stratification, be it social, political, or sexual (an idea that comes from Fereshteh herself – she tells her group that she wrote an article about this and asked to have it published). Milani raises the question of individual identity within regimes or groups that insist on everybody being the same by looking at the communist group as a microcosm compared to the macrocosmic Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, her film is a visual representation of an assignment Nafisi gave to her private class, in which she asked them to write about themselves. Nafisi discovers that they had an unusual difficulty with the assignment: "implicit in almost all their descriptions was the way they saw themselves in the context of an outside reality that prevented them from defining themselves clearly and separately" (*Lolita* 75-6). Because of the oppressive regime, the young women in Dr. Nafisi's private class are unable to see themselves as individuals, as separate and distinct from the mass group of "Muslim women" as defined by Muslim leaders. This inability to see themselves as individuals leads to a crisis of identity in which Fereshteh becomes an empty page, able to be defined by anyone. Fereshteh fills her own pages with herself, within the pages of her diary.

The diary at the heart of *The Hidden Half* creates a distance within which a story is told. Like *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Hidden Half* functions as a frame story; however, there is a difference in the narration. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade tells stories to her husband. In *The Hidden Half*, Fereshteh tells one story to her husband, and it is not told with her voice but with her writing, so he acts as an agent of her narration. Fereshteh places her diary in her husband's suitcase before he travels to interrogate a female political prisoner. He finds the diary in his hotel room the night before the interview, and spends the evening reading his wife's account of her life. In Fereshteh's diary, the story of the 1979 Iranian Revolution is told in flashbacks from her perspective as a young university student and activist at the time. The purpose of the diary has never been for it to remain a private document – always the story is intended for a particular person (in this case Khosro), always is it intended for that story to be read. In her note to her husband (the "preface" to her diary) Fereshteh says:

It's been a long time I should have talked to you. I should have told you many things about my real self. Maybe telling you will help this woman who is awaiting her death. Maybe her death would be the result of a wrong decision. I know I'm taking a risk by recounting these memories, but dear, in my age, one has the right to be herself and I will willingly pay the price. (Milani)

In this sense, Fereshteh writes not only to assert her "I" privately, for the diary is written with a strong first person and not the self-removed "one," but she writes to assert herself, her true self, to her husband. Additionally, she acts as an agent for the nameless female prisoner and by extension all other women by acknowledging the connection she has with all the other Iranian women through their oppression. Fereshteh rejects the persona imposed by outside forces and forms her own self, and maintains and asserts that true self by writing – essentially, she writes herself into existence. Though we do not see his

reaction to his wife, nor do we see the impact her revelation has on their relationship, it is clear that Khosroo has changed the way he views women, particularly those he would ordinarily dismiss. Furthermore, he allows a “bad” woman, to have a voice at the end, which is a victory for Fereshteh and for Iranian women.

In *The Hidden Half*, there is a change or shift in the reader of the diary within the story as opposed to a change in the writer of the diary, which functions both within the text as well as outside of it. Milani exposes an oppressive regime and has her main character ask her husband to listen without prejudice, which is a request for the world outside the film as well as inside it. Fereshteh’s diary not only asserts an identity, but corrects the misassumptions her husband had while defending those who had worked to improve Iran in 1979 and now find themselves punished. We know that she has influenced her husband, as in the last scene he asks the prisoner to tell her story, and listens as she begins: “I have no happy childhood memory . . .” (Milani). This is the same phrase with which Fereshteh began her diary; and it is in this vein of inauspicious beginnings and of connection with a collective female identity that confirms her status as everywoman. This resonates with the concept of collective female authorship originating with Scheherazade. The many faces of female identity become compiled and overlap in their shared oppression. There is a mosaic of women’s identity created and being created in this instance and the others, a mosaic by which both an individual and collective identity is asserted, reasserted, and nuanced. Fereshteh is herself, and yet she is allied and aligned with the unnamed prisoner with nearly every other Muslim woman, and yet remains separate and distinct.

Comparing the diary imbedded in *The Hidden Half* with Nafisi’s diary-form work, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir In Books*, it is clear that Nafisi has a greater degree of freedom in acknowledging her own thoughts and ideas, which is likely a result of her situation as a writer in the United States. Words allow for freedom, as the assumption of language outside the home in many respects equals an assumption of personal freedom and an assertion of personal identity. All too often, Muslim women have found themselves in the unfortunate position of being written, but as they invoke the myth of Scheherazade, they begin to write themselves free. In reclaiming intellectual space and creating a world in which they can envision a better reality for themselves, they create hope and possibility – the possibility that they can bring about change outside the pages of the book. Irshad Manji fosters this hope and possibility in her book, *The Trouble With Islam*, where she discusses Islamic reform, and makes a bold statement regarding independent thinking: “At this stage, reform isn’t about telling ordinary Muslims what not to think, but giving Islam’s 1 billion Muslims permission to think. Since the Koran is a bundle of contradictions, at least when it comes to women, we have every reason to think” (36). With this statement, Manji creates an opening for a conversation. Her statement agrees with the themes of Milani’s film, and enters into the same conversation as Milani and Nafisi. Manji issues an invitation and a call to arms (or words) which she then defines by making a claim to *ijtihad*, an “Islamic legal term meaning “independent reasoning” as opposed to *taqlid* (imitation) It is considered a required religious duty for those qualified to perform it (Esposito 134). Esposito’s definition places requirements (only by certain people, must not counter the Koran or Islamic tradition) on the performance and function of *ijtihad* which seem to counter its definition as “independent reasoning.”

Many Muslims who call for a reform to their faith invoke the idea of *ijtihad* and ask for it to be renewed. Irshad Manji considers *ijtihad* a right and a duty of every Muslim, which she defines according to an anonymous Muslim as “The Islamic tradition of independent reasoning, which he claimed allowed every Muslim, female or male, straight or gay, old or young, to update his or her religious practice in light of contemporary circumstances” (50). Fereshteh questions her society and the system of oppression in which she must live by asking her husband not to prejudge another woman, because that woman’s circumstances are so similar to her own. Fereshteh notes: “Maybe she was convicted by unfair societal rules, and not for a real crime. She could have been me” (Milani). It is from this statement that Fereshteh has engaged in *ijtihad*, and is asking her husband to do the same; likewise, Milani is asking her viewers to engage in *ijtihad*, a shocking and punishable idea in Islamic societies where women are at times discouraged from reading and writing and questioning rules. She does this through example, by pushing her characters to *ijtihad*, which is uncommon. In Shi’ah Islam, most people are discouraged from this practice. In his study of the history and evolution of Islam, Reza Aslan notes:

There are now so many [religious scholars] in the Shi'ite world that only those who have attained the very highest level of scholarship and who can boast the greatest number of disciples are still allowed to practice ijthihad. At the top of this order of mujtahids are the ayatollahs (the title means 'the sign of God'), whose decisions are binding on their disciples. (*No God* 185)

Through flashbacks which show young university students articulating their ideas and feelings, Milani shows the hope of Iranians during a time of unprecedented freedom – hope for a better life for all Iranians, at a time when a young girl at university might believe that she could not only change her world, but could have a voice in policy. By invoking the principles of ijthihad with a revisionist view of Iranian history told with a female voice, Milani seems to express a hope for independent thinking and for a female voice to be heard in oppressive regimes. Furthermore, Milani's film functions to validate the views, i.e., the interpretations, of an individual, which Reza Aslan validates in a religious context, stating that "religion is, by definition, interpretation; and by definition, all interpretations are valid" (*No God* xxvii). Milani uses her female protagonist to express an interpretation of what the concept of "woman," particularly "Muslim woman," is in Islamic countries and what both the concept and the reality could and ought to be. Milani joins Nafisi and Manji in envisioning the future of the Muslim woman by stating not only what is happening, but what should be – but this endeavor is only half of the necessary work to procure a better reality for Muslim women.

The dedicated students and teacher in Nafisi's text and the curious rebel Manji set themselves against and with the sad wives and disillusioned women in *The Hidden Half* to have their say. For these characters, writers, teachers, filmmakers, and countless others, writing oneself is a daily exercise against obliteration and invisibility. Nothing is more important than reading and listening to their words, to all of their words, and accepting their identity as it is expressed. In her memoir, another diary written by a Muslim woman, Nafisi quotes one of her former students, to whom she has given the alias Manna for protection: "I will remain as long as you keep me in your eyes, dear readers" (*Lolita* 343). Within these pages, within the pages of a book, within the world of a film, there is a freedom to speak; however, it remains a closed world unless the reader can make a leap into the depths of what it means to be human, to tie the threads of these scattered voices together into a mosaic that can allow each woman to speak. Scheherazade's talent was so great that her audience, her husband, made this leap, and listened as she spun tales containing taboos concerning male and female relationships and power. He listened as she made a thief sympathetic, made magic real. In the end, she created her own reality. In this tradition, Milani's fictional Fereshteh and Nafisi's students seek to create their own reality, as the writers of these women join Manji and seek to bring about their own version of reality. They write themselves into existence; however, the writing is not the end but rather a means to an end. Writing begins the conversation in which the reader must then partake. As Nafisi's Manna reminds the readers, this discussion suggests that to keep these women in our eyes is to keep them alive. The responsibility is up to the reader of these words to protect the integrity and courage of the writer's imperative. Keeping these women in our eyes is to recognize the integrity of their writing, to honor the ideas of plurality that they espouse, and to support their courage and vulnerability as they speak in the face of opposition.

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