

Guardians of new spaces: “Home” and “exile” in Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series and Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the self-narrated life stories of Azar Nafisi, Marjane Satrapi and Azadeh Moaveni by focusing on “home” as a central metaphor. Each of these life stories is embedded in a specific exilic experience of transmigration, which shaped the author’s perception of “home.” A prominent characteristic of these autobiographical narratives, transmigration encompasses practices of circulating or commuting every few years between the country of origin and host countries, as well as maintaining cultural traditions and close connections with kinship networks. Drawing on real and imagined spaces called “home” as the frame of current discussion has two main purposes. First, it keeps the focus on how the concept and sense of home metaphorically change, rearticulated and reformulated across time and place. Second, it allows for elaboration of how transmigration obscures the contours of modern home and exile, thus constructing the former as temporal and portable.

Home and multiple exiles

Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003a), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series (2003a, 2004)¹ and Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) have become by now hallmarks in an expanding pantheon of Anglo-Francophone autobiographical narratives written by immigrant women of Iranian origin. From 1997 to 2007, Iranian women exiles published more volumes of autobiographies and memoirs than in any previous period. The commercial success of these narratives, especially in the U.S. and Europe, has directed attention to Iranian diasporic literature in particular, and to “Iranian exile cultural production” in general, over the past decade (Malek, 2006:355). These three self-narratives have also contributed to growing scholarly attention to, and a discussion of, Iranian diasporic communities (Bahramitash, 2005;

Corbella, 2006; Davis, 2005; Elahi, 2006; Mozaffari, 2006; Rahimieh, 2007; Rastegar, 2006).

Despite their distinct experiences and circumstances, Nafisi's and Satrapi's autobiographies share several notable traits of involuntary and voluntary exile. Each of them also applies distinguished professional merits to her particular memoirs—Nafisi as a literary scholar and Satrapi as a graphic illustrator and animator. Throughout their upbringing in Tehran, Nafisi (b. 1955) and Satrapi (b. 1969) acquired a Western-style education and, as young adolescents, were sent by their parents, under different conditions, to Europe. With the completion of their studies abroad, they settled back in Iran, yet local turbulences under the Islamic Republic eventually led them both to immigrate during the 1990s—Nafisi to the United States and Satrapi to France. Moaveni (b. 1976), in contrast, was born in San Jose, California, to Iranian exiles and spent summer vacations during her childhood in Iran. Later in life, her career in journalism directed her to Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. From 2000 to 2001, she lived in Tehran, thereafter moved to Beirut and nowadays resides with her immediate family in Iran.

Far from being cases of permanent exile or immutable separation from one's home country, each of these three self-narratives can be broken down into several episodes or multiple exilic experiences and returns, occurring during different stages of the writers' lives. Evoking his own émigré status, Theodore Adorno found exile to be, without exception, a "mutilating" experience (1999:33). As such, the three autobiographies discussed here encompass typical notions of alienation and displacement, as well as myths and memories of home that can be found in other cross-cultural subjective accounts of exile and immigration (Clifford, 1994:304; Shuval, 2001:41). Yet, at the same time, these autobiographical accounts involve a unique comparative perspective of multiple exiles and a process of transmigration.

Moreover, despite disparities to be further discussed, these three self-narratives also embody issues of historical and contemporary contact between home and host countries and the host society's stereotypes and policies towards the society of origin. In the introduction of the first volume of *Persepolis*, Satrapi explains that the prime motivation for producing her memoir was to dispel the Euro-American tainted perception of Iran as an epitome of "fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism" (Satrapi, 2003a:ii). For Moaveni, the tension between "growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran" is crystallized from the outset, in *Lipstick Jihad*'s subtitle. Although, as she herself points out, "this book wasn't meant to be a memoir" (Moaveni, 2005:247), she carefully scatters throughout the text the political context through which it became one:

Given the ugly history and hostage crisis memories, most Americans think and deal with Iran on a very charged and emotional level... [therefore] I wanted to move my [American] audience into reconsidering their thoughts on Iran. ... The voice had to be personal (2005:252).

The effects of the tension between home country and host country are further elaborated in Hamid Dabashi's charged criticism of these memoirists, especially of Nafisi, for becoming "comprador native intellectuals" and cultivating "the U.S. (and by extension the global) public opinion against Iran" (Dabashi, 2006b). Notwithstanding their official objectives for writing their memoirs and declared aspiration to affect ill-governed biases of the West towards Iran, Dabashi, an Iranian-American himself, argues that these self-narratives have managed to achieve the exact opposite by further sustaining orientalist conventions. According to his postcolonial critique, the publication of these memoirs in the aftermath of 9/11 serves the current U.S. administration's "war on terrorism" by promoting the exoticization of Tehran, representing the Islamic Republic as "vile, violent, and above all abusive of women" and disguising "insidious global domination" with "a legitimate critique of localized tyranny" (Dabashi, 2006b).² Dabashi's harsh criticism might indicate how "the concept of exile, like the exilic subjects themselves, is a living, dynamic organism that lurks and thrives in the interstices of social and political formations," as emphasized by Hamid Naficy (1999:10). Hence, when home and host countries are fraught with conflict, the conceptual categorizations of "home" and sense of home become even more complicated, especially for transmigrants (Glick-Schiller, Basch and Szanton, 1995).

In her essay, "The idea of a home," Mary Douglas suggests that "home is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed space ... for a home neither the space nor its appurtenances have to be fixed" (1991:288–289). Capturing one's "house," "family," "community," "neighborhood," "city," "country," "nation," etc., the complexities of what constitutes "a home" are implicated in multifaceted social, political, economic and other contexts (Horwitz and Tognoli, 1982; Mircescu, 2006; Rykwert, 1991). Following the seminal works of Sarah Mahler, Patricia Pessar and Arjun Appadurai on a new sense of space in the current era of globalization, Barbara Burton indicates that transmigration is not merely about "traveling people and the making of places" but also "about what can be imagined by individuals and families apart from or beyond a place." For transmigrants, imaginary spaces become sites where they can "envision, negotiate and nurture a dream about what is elsewhere and then learn to live it, respond to it, and create it" (Burton, 2004:773–774).

The notion of imagining apart from and beyond a place, which might also suit what Nafisi calls "the republic of the imagination," is explicitly apparent in the three self-narratives discussed here. Depicting her final hours before departing the Islamic Republic, Nafisi notes that "more than any other place in our home, the living room was symbolic of my nomadic and borrowed life," which could be "faded into eight gray suitcases, like errant genies evaporating into their bottles" (2003a:4,7). In the first volume of *Persepolis*, Satrapi illustrates a jar she had filled with Iranian soil, from the family garden, before departing to Vienna (2003a:149), and following her mother's visit in Austria, she is left with "a bag of affection" that sustained her for several months (2004:52). In *Lipstick Jihad*, Moaveni elucidates on moments of unpacking boxes from the years in Iran as she sorts through her clothes, "peeling

veil from veil, it is like tracking the rings of a tree trunk to tell its evolution” (2005:ix). She further describes how her aunt, Khaleh Zahra, had shipped the entire contents of her California house (including furniture, washer and dryer) to Tehran, when she moved back home (Moaveni, 2005:48).

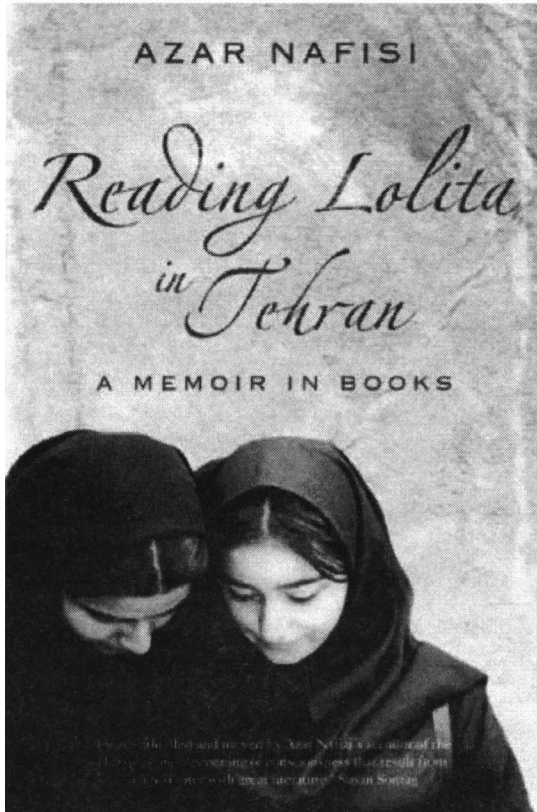
These illustrations of packing and unpacking suitcases and boxes are depicted as ritualistic undertakings involved in homecoming and leaving home. They encompass the movement of different components that are cartable and movable, from notable everyday, easy-to-carry objects to heavy furniture. The ability to transport reminders of home in small bags, boxes or trailers, as well as being in contact with home, are further enhanced by current technological developments. Nowadays, more than ever before, we are surrounded with portable objects supported by wireless communications, mobile architecture and an increasingly interconnected world. Laptops, mobile phones, digital cameras, MP4s and the like have become steady companions in a new “portable world,” as Nafisi terms it. Relating to the flow of poetic ideas, Stephen Burt emphasizes that “not just material objects but also qualities and abstractions may be portable” (2002:24). Even scents and tastes that can be carried (like Satrapi’s bag of pistachio nuts and Moaveni’s plane-mate’s Tupperware full of Persian stews) revive memories of the familiar and provide a sense of home, which become ever more transportable.

Azar Nafisi and a room of her own: Memory and anticipation

Azar Nafisi, a professor of English Literature and currently a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University, is a proud descendant of fourteen generations of Iranian scholars. Despite her family’s “certain rebellious condescension” towards politics and politicians, her father, Ahmad Nafisi, served as the mayor of Tehran and her mother, Nezhat, was one of the first women elected to the Iranian Parliament in 1963 (Nafisi, 2003a:45,84–85,261). Being of a prominent family and self-accomplished by her own right, Nafisi’s exilic experience subsumes three episodes: “an early exile,” “an intellectual exile” (or sort of a spiritual retirement) and “a late exile,” each of which gives rise to a different formulation of home.

The first chapter of Nafisi’s exilic experience begins with an enforced separation from her family and homeland. In 1968, at the age of thirteen, she was sent to complete her studies in Switzerland and England. This early transition had a lasting effect on her perception of home. In the essay, “The stuff that dreams are made of,” she recalls that very moment of initial departure when she was “running around the Tehran airport, crying I didn’t want to leave” and how, from the moment the airplane’s doors were shut, “the idea of return, of home, of Iran became a constant obsession that colored almost all my waking hours and my dreams” (Nafisi, 2006b:1). This “constant obsession,” along with a growing sense of insecurity, especially following her father’s arrest for four years, led Nafisi to indulge in a

series of “home experiments.” In order to revive the sensation of home, before her eighteenth birthday she married a fellow Iranian, moved to the United States and enrolled in the University of Oklahoma as the only foreign student in the English Department. Relating to this transition, Nafisi writes in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: “I attempted to shape other places according to my concept of Iran. I tried to Persianize the landscape and even transferred for a term to a small college in New Mexico, mainly because it reminded me of home” (2003a:82).



Yet home in Norman, Oklahoma, with what she depicts as an “insanely jealous” spouse, was entirely unfulfilling for Nafisi, and after four embattled years she managed to break it off (2003a:83). A divorcee, in her early twenties by that time, she continued to pursue her Ph.D., abstained from the company of Iranian exiles and searched for a new sense of home in the 1970s students’ movements, waged against the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979):

My oppressive yearning for home was shaped into excited speeches against the tyrants back home and their American backers, and although I felt alienated from the movement itself, which was never a home to me at any point, I had found an ideological framework within which to justify this unbridled, unreflective passion (2003a:86).

At this stage, Nafisi's sense of home splits into two. The first is a nostalgic home, epitomized in the formative years in her parent's house, accompanied by her family and enjoying the Caspian summer nights. The second is a sense of an utopian home, depicted in a new vision of revolutionary Iran, for which she had protested and clamored enthusiastically on campus demonstrations and rallies. As memory and anticipation were about to materialize in the 1979 revolution, Nafisi's first chapter of exile came to an end, along with the end of the Pahlavi monarchy.

Nafisi's long-awaited homecoming marks the beginning of her second chapter of "intellectual" exile, lasting eighteen years and occupying most of *Reading Lolita in Tehran's* pages. The clear break between the first and second chapters is already evident from the moment she arrives at Tehran's "unwelcoming" airport, when it seems to her "as if a bad witch with her broomstick had flown over the building and in one sweep, had taken away the restaurants, the children and the women in colorful clothes that I remembered" (2003a:82). Additional home realities of revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), coupled with the "confiscation of their most intimate moments and private aspirations" (2003a:273) by Ayatollah Khomeini's regime, fuse in Nafisi's perceptions of "home" and "exile," inextricably mixing the two into what can be termed "homexilation." At first sight, the dreamland she was yearning for in early exile is almost unrecognizable and becomes even less compelling further along:

Until then home had been amorphous and elusive: it presented itself in tantalizing glimpses, with the impersonal familiarity of old family photographs. But all of these feelings belonged to the past. Home was constantly changing before my eyes. ... In all those years, my yearning was tied to the certainty that home was mine for the having, that I could go back anytime I wished. It was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile (2003a:145).

Nafisi's period of "homexilation" is characterized by growing feelings of home loss and misplacement. In the opinion paper, "Liberal education and the republic of the imagination," she also notes: "during all the years I spent living in the United States and England, I thought of home ... yet as soon as I went back to Iran, I discovered that home was not home" (2006a:8). As the notion of being exiled in her own home country unfolds, Nafisi goes through a gradual process of self-alienation (2003a:246). The old/new sense of misplacement, she elaborates, "is akin to visiting your old house as a wandering ghost with unfinished business ... this is your house,

and it is not. And you are no longer relevant to this house, to its walls and doors and floors; you are not seen" (2003a:169).

For Nafisi, this process of self-alienation reached its peak in the fall of 1995, after resigning her academic post at Alameh Tabatabai University. This step leads her to a self-imposed exile where she restricts herself to one room in the family house, situated on a "dead-end street." In the living room, with its deceptively sunny light, her usual place was always on the chair with its back to the window next to an iron-and-glass table (2003a:6,9). This specific location in Nafisi's homemade sanctuary is especially important to the understanding of "homexilation," because it indicates how home becomes a mere illusion, a mirror reflection. She could not see her favorite and familiar sites, such as the Elburz Mountains, that she was yearning for during her early exile from where she sat, but only through the reflection of an antique oval mirror on the far wall of the dining room (2003a:8,39). "Underneath the window that deceptively showcased only the mountains and the tree outside our house ... the bad witches and furies were waiting to transform us into the hooded creatures ..." (2003a:24). As Nafisi's sense of alienation intensifies, misplacement gives way to notions of mental as well as physical abuse:

living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loath ... 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 (2003a:329).

This forceful realization strikes Nafisi nearly two decades after returning home, after which she decides to extricate herself from what has developed into an alienated home environment for her. The process of extrication, as depicted in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, involves two main steps: a physical detachment from the homeland and its documentation. In the summer of 1997, Nafisi immigrates with her immediate family on a "third exile" to the U.S. During her last night at home, she begins to document her departure.

In her essay, "The quest for the 'real' woman in the Iranian novel," Nafisi contends that "writers become the guardians of new spaces." As authors set the frame, plot and construct characters, the novel "by nature questions absolute authority, even that of the divine power. ... As such it posits a serious threat to any form of absolutism, religious or secular" (Nafisi, 2003b:987). Accordingly, in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* she replicates the realities, created by the manifestation of Ayatollah Khomeini's vision for Iran, and paints them in the colors of her own dreams, as well as nightmares (2003a:11). She becomes a guardian of a new space by captivating her self-narrative through her own imagination and affections and reticulating it with her favorite Western literary protagonists, such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Scott Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, as well as favorite authors, mainly

Henry James and Jane Austen. Similar to her transition to New Mexico, because it reminded her of Iran, further endeavors to search for home away from home, might be seen in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as it approaches Anglo-Western classics through a process of *Persianification*. In Nafisi's words: "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" (2003a:6).

Adapting favorite Western classics to her 1980s and 1990s Tehran experiences also reproduces a world of fantasy, which allows Nafisi to cope with memories of daily repression and persecution bounded by constant feelings of displacement. In contrast to the agonized world of the narrator, in the parallel world of illusion, the living room to which she had restricted herself transforms into a site of transgression "mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below" (2003a:4). Inspired by Virginia Woolf's most recognized essay, *A Room of One's Own* (2003a:12), Nafisi turns her "isolation room" into a wonderland and takes the role of Lewis Carroll's young protagonist, Alice. For two years, she hosts in that living room seven of her best and most committed female students (Manna, Mahshid, Nassrin, Yassi, Azin, Mitra and Sanaz) in a weekly study group where they discuss officially banned Western novels (2003a:2,8).

Throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, fragments of these seven students' lives blend with the writer's contemporary preludes, memories of home and exile and critical reading of Western classics. Nafisi's self-narrative, alternating real, imagined and fictional characters, often obscures the episodes of her students, making it difficult for the reader to distinguish between each of their personal stories and affiliate it with their names. Yet these seven female students set the frame of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

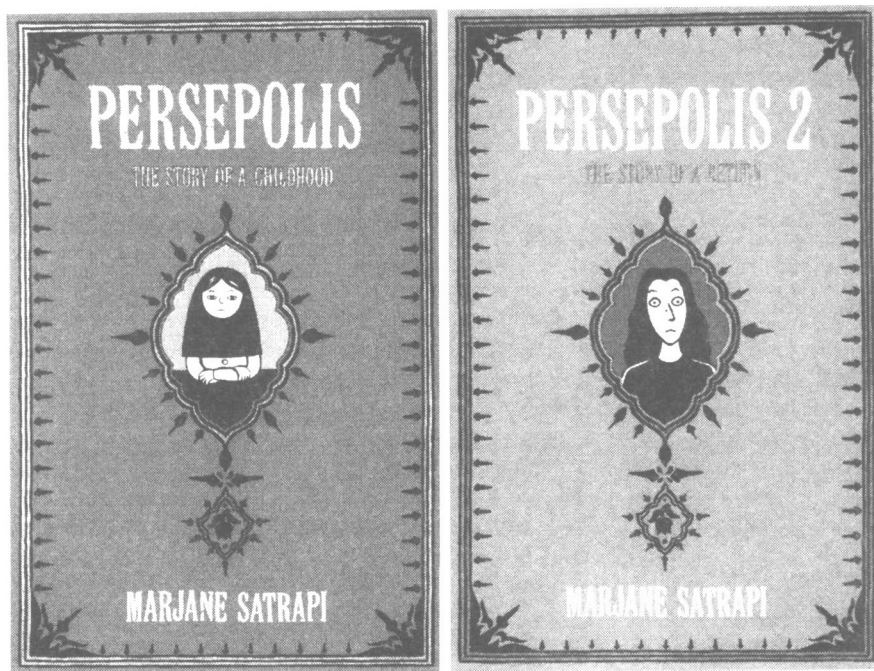
Nafisi begins her memoirs with descriptions of her students' photographs, recounting how each of them arrived at the first Thursday session. As they enter her house and take off their mandatory veils, splashes of colors fill the living room like magic (2003a:4–5, 11–18). Nafisi's colorful depictions, alternating with the motif of a mysterious room hosting pictures of seven women, evoke Nizami Ganjavi's poetic epos, *Haft-e Paykar* (*The Seven Portraits* or *The Seven Beauties*). This twelfth-century masterpiece, which blends history and legend, recounts the adventurous quests of the Sassanian ruler, Behram Gur, who accidentally discovered a hidden locked room in the palace, holding portraits of princesses of seven ancient realms. Thereupon he falls in love with them, and, once crowned as king, travels far in search of the seven maidens, marries them and has an emblematic colored pavilion (associated with the same shades of Nafisi's unveiled students) built for each of them. Behram then wanders between the pavilions as each virtuous princess tells him a tale, imparting a moral lesson, helping him to unveil the wrongs of his kingdom and thereafter govern wisely. In much a similar way, the stories of Nafisi's seven students support her self-narrative by further explicating the circumstances of existing in the Islamic Republic. They also advance the narrative towards her decision to depart from Iran in 1997, which "came about casually—at least that is

how it appeared”; but rather than relating to it as an act of exile/migration, she inexplicitly depicts it as embarking on yet another adventure (2003a:315). Hence, she concludes in the epilogue, alluding to Nabokov’s expatriate Russian professor in *Pnin* (1953), “and I know now that my world, like Pnin’s, will be forever a ‘portable world’” (2003a:341).

Homelessness in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* 1 and 2

Marjane Satrapi relates her memoirs through a linear graphic series, of black-and-white comic format, which includes four chapters: childhood, early adolescence, late adolescence in exile and homecoming. The first chapter is illustrated through the eyes of ten-year-old Marjane, who attempts to grasp the dramatic events taking place in Iran following the 1979 revolution and the successive changes brought about by the Islamic Republic. This period witnesses the temporary closure of all secular foreign schools—such as the Jeanne D’Arc School she had attended—and the formation of sex-segregated schools wherein *chador* (veil) is in her child-like eyes unexplainable, inconvenient and obligatory for all girls. For young Marjane, these outdoor occurrences have profound indoor ramifications. Previous absolute truths suddenly become false. She comes to realize, for instance, that “God did not choose the king” (Satrapi, 2003a:19). Additionally, the fusion of faith and ideology results in an illustration depicting a striking resemblance between God and Karl Marx (2003a:13).

Adjusting new meanings to old concepts, outdoor confusion is further enhanced by the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war. The “black cloud” of Iraqi missiles hovering over the country is juxtaposed with a growing hostile environment and waves of immigrants and out-migration. Neighbors are denouncing one another for violating revolutionary values (such as possessing video cassettes, decks of cards, chess sets) (2003a:105), acquaintances are fleeing the country and others have disappeared without a trace. Whereas Marjane is able to transform most of these outdoor occurrences into kids’ street games, the execution of her uncle Anoosh, indicted for spying for Russia, shakes her faith completely and seals the chapter of her childhood (2003a:70).



During the course of her early adolescence, in the early 1980s, occasional street harassment by the Revolutionary Guards, in charge of enforcing the regime's strict public moral code, interrupts Marjane's daily routine. In her attempts to avoid the patrols, she adopts deception and pretending as legitimate means of survival. For instance, when she is detained, the protagonist tells the Revolutionary Guard that her mother is dead and her stepmother is really cruel (2003a:134). Yet, despite the constant transformations in the urban ambience and the risks involved, Satrapi's self-narrative also exposes various ways her relatives struggle to retain the normalcy of their pre-war lifestyle. Under the most extreme circumstances of war and political upheaval, banned posters are smuggled in coat linings, fake passports (2003a:123) and bribery become useful for evading prosecution (2003a:110), parties and card games are held behind thick black curtains, and basements are turned into homemade wine factories (2003a:106).

Nonetheless in the midst of war, as home is no longer stable or safe, the Satrapis feel it is better for their daughter "to be far away and happy than close by and miserable" (2003a:148). Thus in 1984, fourteen-year-old Marjane arrives in Vienna. After spending two weeks with family friends, she is enrolled in a local missionary boarding school without knowing a word in German. Losing the safe haven of home and away from her family, Marjane attempts in vain to integrate into

Viennese society. During her four years in Austria, she changes accommodations eight times and even changes her looks and negates her origins. For a while, she adopts a puckish hairstyle and introduces herself as Marie-Jeanne from France, because “to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear” (Satrapi, 2004:41). On other occasions, she defines herself as a “third worlder” and tries to find a sense of belonging among other marginalized groups, such as young anarchists, commune members, homosexuals and junkies. In an interview with Annie Tully, following the publication of *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi remarks that complete integration in exile involves rejection of one’s previous culture “because culture takes all of the space inside you” (Tully, 2004). Yet, making room for another culture, in order to assimilate, was also accompanied by feelings of “betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by someone else’s rules” (Satrapi, 2004:39).

Satrapi carefully portrays Marjane in the formative years of childhood and through adolescence as a victim of circumstances, who is always pushed around by others and subjected to outside forces. This sense of victimization, along with self-doubt, low self-confidence, the physical metamorphosis of adolescence and lonesomeness away from home, pushes Satrapi’s young protagonist, Marjane, completely out of control. In this process she loses every sense of home until she becomes, literally, homeless. For three months, she sleeps in the streets, spends the mornings on the Tramway and searches for food in trashcans (2004:83–85). In 1988, after reaching rock bottom in exile and realizing she is proud to be an Iranian, Marjane longs to return home, to Iran (2004:91).

Marjane’s early exile ends with the termination of the war. Nevertheless, from the moment she arrives at Mehrbad airport, the sight of the customs agent makes her feel “the repressive air” of Iran (2004:92). Similar to Nafisi, “homexilation” strikes Marjane gradually. Walking through the renamed streets of Tehran, she feels like she is “walking through a cemetery ... surrounded by the victims of a war I had fled” (2004:97). Indoors, she looks for her childhood possessions in the closet and drawers only to find them all empty (2004:94). Her home has become her parent’s house and when family and friends welcome her home, she finds them inane. “Certainly, they’d had to endure the war, but they had never known the confusion of being a Third-Worlder, they had always had a home ... I thought that by coming back to Iran, everything would be fine” (2004:113–114).

Ashamed of her experiences in Vienna and haunted by Iran’s unfamiliar scars of war, eighteen-year-old Marjane feels identity-less, neither Westerner nor Iranian, and at one point decides to take her own life, but fails (2004:118–119). Resolved to compensate for her lost years at home, in 1990, Marjane enrolls in the local college of art and tries to become domesticated by marrying her first husband, Reza, an Iran–Iraq war veteran, because “I sought in him a war which I had escaped” (2004:125). Three years later, as matrimony proved to be unsatisfying and revolutionary values horribly suffocating, Marjane decides to break off the relationships with both her husband and homeland.

Upon graduation, “not having been able to build anything in my own country, I prepared to leave it once again” (2004:185). In 1994, Satrapi departs Iran for Strasbourg’s School of Decorative Arts. Whereas the first departure was painful and traumatic, leaving Iran again aroused no lament. In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh, Satrapi expresses her reconciliation: “I am not a victim anymore. I’m not the one [whom] things happen to, I am producing things for myself” (Shaikh, 2005). Turning exile into a form of symbolic gain, Satrapi places herself in relation to “homexile” in the following manner:

I am a foreigner in Iran ... it’s a good feeling not to belong to any place anymore, at the same time it’s a hard feeling. I can live fifty years in France and my affection will always be with Iran. If I were a man I might say that Iran is my mother and France is my wife. My mother, whether crazy or not, I would die for her, no matter what, she is my mother. She is me and I am her. My wife I can cheat on with another woman, I can leave her, I can also love her and make her children, I can do all of that but it’s not like with my mother (Tully, 2004).

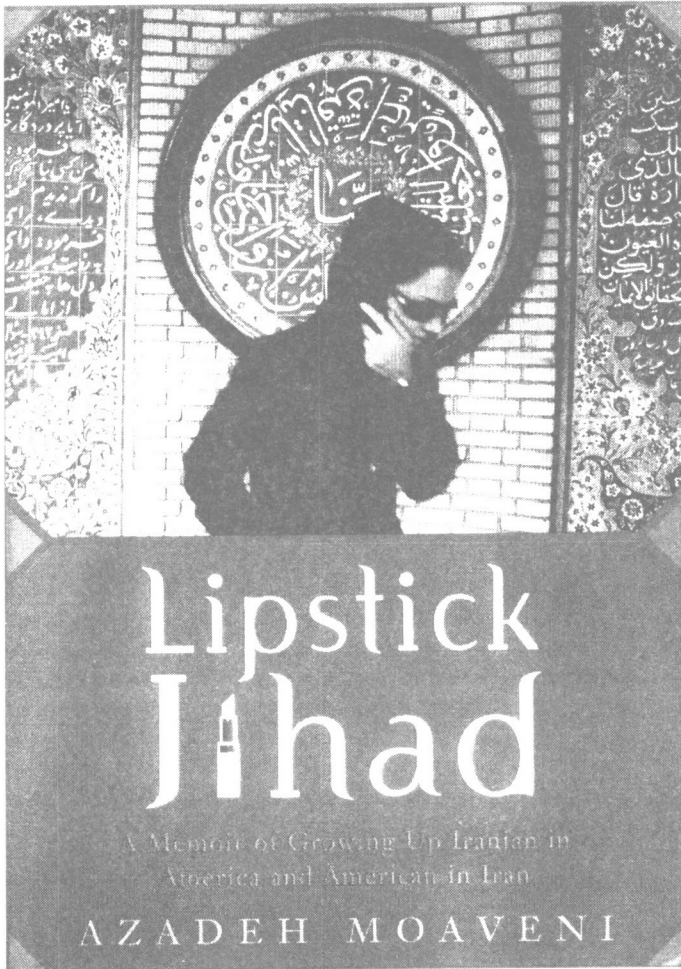
In a review titled, “Why I wrote *Persepolis*,” Satrapi even considers transmigration an important means of solving conflicts: “[I]f people are given the chance to experience life in more than one country, they will hate a little less. It’s not a miracle potion, but little by little you can solve problems in the ‘basement’ of a country, not on the surface” (2003b:11). She further suggests that “instead of using money to create arms, countries should invest in scholarships for kids to study abroad” (2003b:11).

Azadeh Moaveni: Transplanted Iranian of the imagination

For Azadeh Moaveni, unlike Nafisi and Satrapi, pondering her Iranian identity was not grounded on personal nostalgia and loss or early separation from the home country. It was, however, connected with a second generation’s “healthy patriotism” or “long-cultivated fantasies” (Moaveni, 2005:44). Moaveni’s perception of Iran as “home” and “homeland” was first created by third parties, particularly her maternal grandmother, parents and the Iranian diaspora. For many years, she writes, “my mother essentially *was* Iran to me. During her long stretches of estrangement, I felt exiled from Iran as well” (2005:212). Culturally based, Moaveni’s Iranian-ness was also plugged into Persian classic books and fables, “leisurely black and white old films like *My Uncle Napoleon*,” fondness for Iranian classical music and Persian cuisine (2005:17,44).

Despite a stable and happy childhood in California, Moaveni’s early memoir demonstrates a continuous identity crisis between “two irreconcilable halves”

(2005:26). Though born in the U.S. to Iranian immigrants, Moaveni's "family had always insisted we weren't really immigrants as such, but rather a special tribe who had been temporarily displaced." Her mother used to make it very clear, "immigrants come on boats. We came on planes. We were émigrés, exiles, mentally still in between" (2005:28). In such an atmosphere of in-betweenness, "there was Azadeh at school, who managed to look and sound like the other kids, barring the occasional lunchbox oddity; and there was Azadeh at home, who lived in a separate world, with its own special language and rituals" (2005:19).



Growing up in the U.S., on the backdrop of the American hostage crisis, further complicated Moaveni's self-perception. Feeling "just plain Iranian," she avoided mentioning her Iranian origins, often abstained from inviting schoolmates home and even considered changing her name to Elizabeth. For many years, she preferred to present herself as Persian, just to realize "no one knew what or where Persia was" (2005:9).

By late adolescence, Moaveni had already managed to banish every externalized expressive feature of Iranian-ness. She had also become indifferent to her family's struggle with nostalgia and arguments over the politics of "a home wrecked with inter-cultural turmoil" (2005:26). It was only during her academic years, at the University of California in Santa Cruz, particularly in the late 1990s, that she realized she was in denial of her permanence in America and that "Iranian-ness was not an obstacle" to her independence (2005:28). Being totally immersed, at that point of time, with her Iranian origins in particular and the Middle East in general, Moaveni assumed that the only place she could actually feel at home, the place where she belonged, was Iran (2005:28).

For Moaveni, the road to Tehran passed through Cairo. In 1999, she won a Fulbright fellowship to study Arabic at the American University of Cairo. Egypt's proximity to the Iranian time zone intensified her yearning for "a physical journey, not some abstract spiritual one ... at some indefinite point in the future" (2005:31). Though she did not have much memory of Tehran, "knew very little about post-revolutionary Iran" and "didn't even know how to count *toman*," she was directed towards Iran by a "homing device planted deep inside" (2005:31,37). By her mid-twenties, Moaveni was anxious to scrutinize her Iranian-ness by creating her own first-hand experiences of home (2005:33–37).

In the second chapter of *Lipstick Jihad*, entitled "Homecoming," Moaveni reflects on the process through which her old ideas about Iran, inscribed by years of exiles' psychology of Iranian diaspora, gradually shatter to pieces. The Iran she encounters for a few weeks in 1999 and through 2000–2001, as a stringer of *Time* magazine, was not a "static, failed state in unchanging decline" (2005:37), but "of all things, terribly foreign" (2005:49). Relating to herself and other relatives who also embarked on an "Iranian odyssey" (2005:viii) during the late 1990s, Moaveni comprehends that, in trying to realize her Iranian identity, "we had arrived in Tehran as Iranians of the imagination" (2005:86). Much to her astonishment, she discovers that even the "Farsi-speaking parts of our soul" were actually "kitchen Farsi," a non-fluent "fusion of Farsi and English that we spoke in California" (2005:89).

The old childhood duality of internal/external, private/public and American/Iranian thus strikes Moaveni in Iran as well. "Inside homes, I felt perfectly at home as an Iranian" (2005:50), but outside, the "sense of displacement followed me everywhere" (2005:112). Struggling to reconcile with being an "authentic," "partial" or "superficial" Iranian (2005:115,120), Moaveni strives to cope with actually existing in contemporary Iran as well. Much to the disdain of her

family, friends and neighbors, she leases a one-bedroom apartment, creating an “interior space where East and West fused.” Similar to Nafisi’s living room, this apartment becomes Moaveni’s hub of the universe in Tehran, her special place of retreat and “when friends called, I refused to go out” (2005:112).

As pre-revolutionary nostalgia and California’s émigré political salon prove to be entirely incompatible with “the collective consciousness of the Iranians who never left,” Moaveni comes to accept that there is a clear difference between Iran’s nostalgic lover and a realistic one (2005:19). While the former is attached to the memories intertwined with Iran of the past, the latter loves Iran unconditionally, “*despite* its flaws, because an affection that can’t look its object in the face is a selfish one” (2005:45). Nonetheless, one can be an Iranian without the Islamic Republic and one can spend a lifetime in Iran without being able to completely lose his or her “hyphenated entity” (2005:175). Trying to convey the notions of the Iranian diaspora or rather subconsciously give voice to her “two irreconcilable halves,” Moaveni concludes:

[We were] fated to be at home nowhere—not completely in America, not completely in Iran. For us, home was not determined by latitudes and longitudes. It was special. This, this was the modern Iranian experience, that bound the diaspora to Iran. We were all displaced, whether internally, on the streets of Tehran, captives in living rooms, strangers in our own country, or externally, in exile ... Iran had been disfigured, and we carried its scraps in our pockets, and when we assembled, we laid them out, and were home (2005:246).

Conclusion

The autobiographical narratives of Nafisi, Satrapi and Moaveni reveal the complexities of home perception against the backdrop of modern transmigrational experiences of Iranian exiles. In all three self-narratives, concepts of home are often articulated in terms of national identity and Iranian culture, incorporated with an altering idea of an imagined Iran. Nafisi’s nostalgic home/Iran in early adolescence is replaced by an utopian Iran during early adulthood, and later in life by a “web of fiction” from which she yearns to escape (Nafisi, 2003a:317). For eighteen-year-old Satrapi, returning from Vienna, Iran is a sort of a “correction home,” designed to remove the guilt and shame she felt following her early exile. By her mid-twenties, home/Iran is so crushed by the local government and “weight of traditions” that Satrapi feels unable to perform professionally and decides to leave her “broken home” once again (Satrapi, 2004:185). In contrast, for Moaveni, the nostalgic “poetic world of nightingales” turning into “a firsthand lesson in the evolution of a

tyrannical regime” is highly beneficial in advancing her journalistic career (Moaveni, 2005:46).

Hence, the three self-narratives discussed here also indicate how notions of home are transformed across different stages of one’s life cycle. These shifting notions are accompanied by constantly evolving opportunities of globalization, mobility and transportability. Although the movement of people and goods entail nothing new in human history, current conditions allow individuals (and groups) greater possibilities, to use Moaveni’s words, to be “transplanted everywhere” (2005:47) and design a home of their own in real, imagined or fictional spaces.

NOTES

¹ Marjane Satrapi’s series was originally published in France by L’Association in four volumes: *Persepolis 1* (2000), *Persepolis 2* (2001), *Persepolis 3* (2002) and *Persepolis 4* (2003). This review relates to the English translation in two volumes: *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003a) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004). The animated film *Persepolis*, based on Satrapi’s autobiographical graphic novel, was released to theaters in Europe and the U.S. in 2007.

² For further reading on the debate following Dabashi’s critique, see, e.g., Byrne (2006); Dabashi (2006a); and Khosmood (2006).

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