

The Veil and Veiled Identities in Iranian Diasporic Writings

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Abstract— The semantic diversity of veil has been discussed by many scholars. The veil has been assigned various meanings and representations in the works of Muslim writers. This notion has found new dimensions particularly in Muslim diasporic writings where hybridized identities are constructed by experiences with racism, multiculturalism, ambivalence and religious dissonance in the host community. At the same time, Muslim diasporic women writers approach the notion of veil in various ways. This can be traced in a great diversity among Muslim women regarding the use of veil. In Iranian diasporic writings, issue of the veil constantly emerges as an indispensable facet of Iranian women's identities. The purpose of this study is to explore the prominent place that (un)veiling has for the construction of women's identities through the narratives of remembered pasts of diasporic Iranians in the United States. This paper mainly focuses on Azar Nafisi's writings to investigate and examine the ways the veil shape various aspects of her female characters. The analysis demonstrates that the question of veiling is pressing when women's veiling becomes a means to veil their identities. This study attempts to reveal how the veil negotiates, resists, and reinvents the forces informing the realities and identities of Iranian women.

Keywords—veiling; the veil; Muslim Diaspora; Iranian Diaspora; female identity; women's identities; veiled identities

I. INTRODUCTION

The semantic diversity of veil has been discussed by many scholars. The veil has been assigned various meanings and representations in the works of Muslim writers. This notion has found new dimensions particularly in Muslim diasporic writings where hybridized identities are constructed by experiences with racism, multiculturalism, ambivalence and religious dissonance in the host community. One of the major concepts of Muslim diaspora is the interconnection of veiling practices and female identities. It is interesting to investigate how religious identity in diaspora is mediated by many other factors such as gender, class, ethnic origin, and national status. And the veil, as it is usually understood as the main component of female identity, needs to be relegated by many other factors of Muslim women's reality. Muslim diasporic women writers approach the notion of veil in various ways. This can be traced in a great diversity among Muslim women regarding the use of veil. In Iranian diasporic writings, this concept constantly

emerges as an indispensable facet of Iranian women's identities and as a transformative impact on them.

In many Iranian diasporic memoirs, the women writers share their pictures of the homeland with the readers through the life of the female protagonists. These pictures are their predicaments and struggles as women inside and outside of the homeland, as well as their accounts of the ancestral culture and tradition of the homeland before and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Diasporic writings as an exemplar of 'writing back' provides an opportunity for the Iranian diasporic women writers to highlight the concepts that are significant in their lives and pertinent to their identities. The purpose of this study is to explore the prominent place that veiling has for the construction of women's identities through the narratives of remembered pasts of diasporic Iranians in the United States. The paper mainly focuses on Azar Nafisi' writings to investigate and examine the ways the veil shape various aspects of her female characters in *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A memoir in Books* (2003). This study attempts to reveal how the veil negotiates, resists, and reinvents the forces informing the realities and identities of Iranian women.

It is important to note that this paper has no intention whatsoever to support or reject the ideas in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Its attempt is to research the ways that the practice of veiling shapes identities of the female characters as *women*. The stories of Iranian diasporic women writers embody dimensions of the notion of veil with regard to who they are and who they want to be. We witness a persistence of the picture of Muslim women commonly understood as covered in headed scarves. Being exiled from their home country has granted a fundamental opportunity for the women writers to look back and comprehend their splintered diasporic identity and its attachment to the notion of veil. Iranian diasporic writings show that the discourse on veiling is intertwined with identity of Iranian women more fundamentally, intensely and profusely as compared to that of other Muslim women either diasporic or writing from their homelands. The exiled outlook on the inaccessible homeland in the female writers' journeys and their earlier sense of veiling, are complicated when women are given a choice to veil or unveil in the host-land.

It cannot be denied that there are myriad of interpretations and discussions on veiling in Islam for women. This necessitates a scholarly differentiation between Muslim countries and Islamic countries, the latter may

generally refer to those which practice extremist models of Islam and the former to those which lead a more liberal and contemporary notion of Islam. There should also be demarcation in terms of studying the veil with reference to Muslim women living in such countries and those living in exile, and so on so forth. Studies on issues of veiling by female diasporic writers are worthwhile because they create awareness and can act as a tool to counter interiorizing images of Muslim women; and that veiling of head is a freedom of choice and does not mean veiling of the mind.

II. THE VEIL AND FEMALE IDENTITIES

Veiling is often referred to as covering, headscarves, turbans or burqas. In the literature on gender and Islam, it depicts the practices of covering women's heads, hair and bodies and sometimes faces as an Islamic principle for Muslim women. As one of the earliest debate on the notion of veil in the Middle Eastern Arab's Islam, Leila Ahmed (1992) opines that the veil used to be as a differentiation between "reputable" and "disreputable" women [1]. The association of the veil to women's respectability can be found mainly in the past. The history of veiling shows that this practice has acquired diverse semantics in different periods and reigns. Once, veiling was the sign of "prestige" and "respectability" that could be afforded only by wealthy families. Female laborers and slaves did not need to practice veiling because it could impede their movements [2]. Now, veiling has even acquired erotic meanings, associating it with women's sexuality. Shirazi in her comprehensive book, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* (2003), on the contemporary role and concept of veiling asserts that the veil is a symbol of women's oppression both in western context and the Muslim world. The veil is used to mock the backwardness of Muslim traditions and customs by the western media [2].

Many scholars have stated their dissatisfaction of the ways the image of Muslims are always associated to religion and so is the veil for Muslim women. They consider this as a "racist" act where the diversity of Muslims is ignored or reduced to "the life experience of people living in or coming from Islamic countries to matters of religion and religion alone" [3]. Similarly, Miriam Cooke in "The Muslimwoman" (2007) argues the significance of the veil in identification of women as Muslim: "The veil, real or imagined, functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape" [4]. Cooke is in search of identification for women that is not evaluated by veiling and unveiling, and that goes beyond the national, ethnic, cultural, historical and even philosophical diversity of Muslim women.

The diversity of semantics of the veil for Muslim women can be traced not in the religion per se, but in the dominant cultural and social values, beliefs, regimes, or the effects of modernity and westernization. *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* (Bates et al, 2005), a comprehensive book on issues and realities of women all over the world, has a similar view with regard to the veil and Muslim women: "There is a great diversity among Muslim women regarding the use of veils, headscarves, and burqas. Some Muslim women wear none of

these. The practice is governed by national law, ideological purpose, and custom" [5].

Past studies show that meanings of the veil chiefly depend on the historical, cultural, social, political, religious and ideological contexts it appears. Modern history of Iran manifests many possible semantics of the veil. Reza Shah's western sentiments and his concept of progressive women, as part of his attempts in modernizing and westernizing the nation-state, by blindly following the western dress and lifestyle created different connotations for veiling in the 1930s in Iran. During Reza Shah's reign, "class attitudes to the veil reversed, with the upper class embracing western reforms including western dress, while the working poor saw the veil as a sign of propriety" [6].

The five years of forced unveiling by Reza Shah from 1936 to 1941, the White Revolution in 1963 that included "women enfranchisement and other reforms favouring women" [7], were then followed by forced veiling by the Islamic Republic in 1979, none of which considered the status of women rather than women's look and appearance. The anti-western doctrines of the Islamic republic in 1979 were partially effectuated by setting a dress code for Iranian women, which imposed a new identity to them.

For Iranian diasporic women memoirists, who had to leave Iran either reluctantly or voluntarily, the veil is always remembered as an essential part of their identity and self. Azar Nafisi in her look at the homeland from a distance recalls her alienation with the imposed veil. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), we witness how veiling persistently "brings back ominous memories. She [Nafisi] does not feel at home in the clothes she is forced to wear" [8].

III. (UN)VEILING AND CHANGING IDENTITIES

Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), taught literature in Iranian universities in the two decades following the 1979 revolution. For a period of time she stopped working as a sign of her opposition to wearing the head scarf. Then she returned to teaching, and continued her academic life and service in universities in Iran. Towards the end of her stay in Iran, she started a private class in her house for seven of her female students. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (be referred to hereafter as RLT) is centered on discussions and ideas in this class [9]. Nafisi's understanding of the complex political, social, and cultural realities of modern Iran have been represented through characters, events, time setting, and reading of her favourite texts of the Persian and western literature. The memoir is the author's account of her life experience as a woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 1980s and 1990s.

The readers of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* are intrigued by the recurring theme of veiling that foreshadows and overshadows events and characters in the story. The images of women and their connection to the practice of veiling can be examined in several ways. Gender identity is one of the most applied notions to the veil in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Introducing her students at the beginning of the book, Nafisi describes each woman in Islamic dress defined by the

Islamic Republic of Iran. Each student removes the Islamic dress after arriving at her place and reveals the casual/smart clothes (the so-called western clothes) she wears in the safety and privacy of Nafisi's house (RLT, pp. 4-6). The duality of gender operations is revealed when such a defined dress code is not applicable to men in the Iranian society. They appear more or less the same in public and inside the house, before and after the Iranian revolution.

The way that the veil is intertwined with identity of the female characters can be clearly seen where Nafisi describes her notion of unveiling: "When my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self" (RLT, p. 4). Nafisi poetically describes her feeling every time she watches this ritual during nearly two years and almost every time she "could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into color" (RLT, p. 4). The association of unveiling with bursting into colour can be construed as two different versions of reality and identity of the women's life in Nafisi's memoir. The metaphor of colour refers to women's individuality that has been taken from them by imposing the dress code by the authority; they become each other's extensions, one colour, a mass with no distinguishable or definite identity or personality. Nafisi portrays each woman in detail and their change into a new person, each one gains "a shape" and "a self" upon removing the forced dress code. This emphasizes the ways their homogenous appearance transforms to heterogeneous identities, beliefs and worldviews. The elaborate description of her seven students' appearance and attitudes demonstrates the abundant and yet unidentified heterogeneity among Iranian women's dress, attitudes and beliefs despite the authority's attempts to group them as Muslim women.

The ritual of unveiling casts a new identity over the female characters in the memoir. Unveiling has been interpreted by many reviewers of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* "as a process whereby the women 'emerge as individuals' ..., revealing 'vivid personalities'... and 'shedding their inhibitions, speaking openly'" [10]. Nafisi signifies the way the self and identity are enhanced upon taking off the veils; they are a new person maybe with new thoughts and ideologies. Nafisi also details her own efforts to avoid being compelled to veil, which eventually leads to expulsion from her teaching post. It is interesting to note that in the real life of Iranian women, the ritual of veiling is repeated everyday upon each entry into the privacy of their house or that of their relatives, acquaintances, neighbours, and friends, those whom they may trust in or feel comfortable with. By unveiling in the context of the story, Nafisi refers to uncovering the head and changing the long loose dress (the Islamic dress code) to ordinary clothes, formal or casual dress, perhaps a T-shirt or a blouse and a pair of denim. These simple and taken-for-granted matters for other women all over the world have become a controversial issue of identity for Iranian women as represented in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

The diasporic perspective on veiling in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* proves the veil was used as a political agenda to

consolidate the image of the Iranian women in the time setting of the memoir. Nafisi describes in detail each of her students' appearances upon arrival at her house. Mahshid, one of her students, after taking off her black robe hesitates to take off her headscarf when she enters Nafisi's house. Nafisi tells her that there are no men in the house and she can take off the scarf, too. Nafisi's account of Mahshid's life, Mahshid's father as a devout Muslim, her meticulous observation of veiling practice and that she wore the scarf even before the revolution put veiling in contestation as faith or a political force. Nafisi writes about Mahshid:

Before the revolution, ... she had worn the scarf as a testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless (RLT, p. 9).

Reading Lolita in Tehran is Iranian women's silent confession for those who have the power to observe the alternatives, and whose mandatory veiling or unveiling foists construction of new identities on them. The question of veiling is pressing when women's veiling becomes a means to veil their identities. Veiling acquires new dimensions as a political force the same way unveiling did in Reza Shah's time. At the time of the events in the memoir, there were not yet various styles of veiling as they are practiced in present Iran. However, the question posed in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not about the form and style of the dress. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* rejects veiling when it becomes the site of political contestation, a force of an eventful law and order, when the veil became compulsory and a means of control of the mind and freedom. Throughout the book, it is veiling of the mind and freedom that is accused and resisted.

Before the revolution, Iranian women were not obligated to wear the veil for almost fifty years. They had the freedom to choose what to wear similar to women in some other Muslim countries. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi writes about her compromise and accepting the veil and that she came back to academia and resumed her career in Iranian universities until 1995. However, the issue of veiling in Iranian society is her "constant obsession" in her memoir of the homeland. Her vivid memories narrate her intention, reasons and true feeling with regard to the mandatory veil when she says:

I told ...that my integrity as a teacher and a woman was being compromised by its insistence that I wear the veil under false pretenses for a few thousand tumans a month. The issue was not so much the veil itself as freedom of choice. My grandmother had refused to leave the house for three months when she was forced to unveil. I would be similarly adamant in my own refusal (RLT, p. 101).

The two important aspects of her identity as a woman and a teacher would jeopardize if she accepts to put on the fake mask, a pretense that would lead into conflict with her principles and rights as a free human/woman.

Nafisi resisted subjugation and transformation where the implementation of strict policies and new laws influenced her sense of who she is. When she was asked by some colleagues why she was making "such a fuss over a piece of cloth?", Nafisi replies:

...it was not that piece of cloth that I rejected, it was the transformation being imposed upon me that made me look in the mirror and hate the stranger I had become (RLT, p. 165).

At the time setting of the memoir, the defined proper Islamic dress code in Iran was either a chador or a long dark robe. However, women have adapted various styles of veiling especially in non-governmental sectors. The cover image of the book is an example of the way students wear when they go to school. The immediate effects of such a dress code on women's lives and identity is the major issue in Nafisi's memoir. Nafisi's refusal to put on "that piece of cloth" (RLT, p. 165) exemplifies her desperate insistence not to metamorphose to a stranger with her own self and identity.

Nafisi explains to a colleague why she had to leave Tehran University in 1981:

I told her I did not want to wear the veil in the classroom. Did I not wear the veil, she asked, whenever I went out? Did I not wear it in the grocery store and walking down the street? It seemed I constantly had to remind people that the university was not a grocery store (RLT, pp. 225-226).

Wearing the veil becomes a question of her identity when she was forced to wear it in a place where she could witness the ways identities take new dimensions every day, where she was supposed to teach her students the meaning of identity. A university is a place for knowledge and experience, where identities take shape, a place for the contestation of being, learning and becoming. Nafisi remembers that she went back to university though she had to wear headscarf, whereas she did not fight not to wear it when she was going to the grocery store. Her Diasporic memory analyses this act as a question of her identity. She remembers that it became questionable for her when she realized that it was to veil her identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to discuss dimensions of veiling as one of the important facets of female identities in Iranian diasporic writings as part of Muslim Diaspora. It aimed to demonstrate and discuss the representations of the various physical and mental, real and imagined notions of the veil which delimit the lives of the female protagonists in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The analysis showed that the notion of veiling becomes questionable when it is associated with the characters' gender identity as women, and is used as a political agenda by the authority as represented by Nafisi in her memoir. The differentiation between veiling the head and veiling the mind was the main

concern in Nafisi's narration of her homeland. This paper discussed that Nafisi's concern in highlighting how veiling forms and shapes women's identities, is in fact a search for a modern notion of veil where it is not a threat and a force but a choice in a free society.

The scholarly discussions of the veil have something in common. They are indirectly in search of a modern notion of veiling that is not considered only as a religious practice. Creating moderation over the issues of the veil by considering a modern sense of the veil as practiced in many moderate Muslim courtiers such as Malaysia, Bahrain and Egypt can avoid the loopholes in representations of veiling by the western world.

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