

Banishing the Ghosts of Iran

By Fatemeh Keshavarz

THE RECENT ARREST in Iran of Haleh Esfandiari, director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, has ignited a storm of protest around the Western world. To many Americans, it is but one more sign that Iran, in particular, and the Muslim Middle East, in general, are inhospitable to women and to freethinkers. For some years, America's popular reading list has bolstered that view, ignoring political complexities of the region in favor of a simple narrative.

Best sellers like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Random House, 2003), Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (Riverhead Books, 2003), and Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* (Little, Brown, 2003) have enforced and embellished the one-sided picture of Middle Eastern culture. Call it the "New Orientalism."

In the 1970s, Edward W. Said's influential *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978) offered a decisive critique of entrenched Western assumptions that construed Europe as the norm, from which the "exotic" and "inscrutable" Orient deviates. Not infallible—but certainly profound and engaging—Said's views fired the imagination of such influential scholars as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, now central to postcolonial and subaltern studies.

But a new version of earlier assumptions pervades our culture today. The old European Orientalist writers of the 18th through the 20th centuries treated Middle Eastern culture and people as having been great in the remote past, but devoid of complexity and agency in the present. The New Orientalists don't improve on that. Whether it is Nafisi's women reading Western literature in postrevolutionary Iran, a brave bookseller smuggling works into Seierstad's Taliban-run Kabul, or Amir's guilt at tolerating the rape and repression of his kite-runner friend in Hosseini's book, they all reduce the cavernous and complicated story of the region into "us" and "them" scenarios.

Make no mistake. We should protest the incarceration of any academic anywhere in the world who gets caught in the crossfire of political games. We all wish Esfandiari to be freed, but the danger is that we will color all of Iran, the country in which I was born and whose contemporary literature and culture are a delight to teach, with such actions. If we do, we will give less, not more, aid to the many intellectuals, scholars, and writers who, little known in the United States, make up a vibrant, multifaceted Iranian culture. Bottom line: Iran—like many other countries in the Middle East—is more than a country of victims and villains. It has much to offer the world.

What makes the old Orientalism and its newer version effective is that their sinister plots build on each other—and gradually seep into our daily accumulated fears. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), the sociologist Avery F. Gordon explains that ghost stories are accounts of phantoms that disturb the reader with



ALEX WILLIAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

their overpowering presence. And yet their most distinct feature is that they are absent from view. Ghosts haunt us by *not being* there. And the New Orientalist literature has been producing ghosts in abundance. Muslim ghosts are large in number and perfectly wicked, suitable qualities for generating fear. They are old, so their past supplies material for nightmarish rereadings of history.

The memoirs, travel accounts, novels, and journalistic writings whose popular domain is haunted by Muslim ghosts vary in quality. Thematically, they stay focused on the public phobia: blind faith and cruelty, political underdevelopment, and women's social and sexual repression. They provide a mix of fear and intrigue—the basis for a blank check for the use of force in the region and Western self-affirmation. Perhaps not all the authors intend to sound the trumpet of war. But the divided, black-and-white world they hold before the reader leaves little room for anything other than surrender to the inevitability of conflict between the West and the Middle East.

An example is Nafisi, a visiting fellow at the Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, in Washington, whose memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* I use to analyze the New Orientalist approach in my book *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007). In the memoir, the professor of literature who is the book's narrator brings other women into her home to read Western classics. Outside the reading group, the author is angered by the preference that a male Muslim student exhibits for the protagonist in Maksim Gorky's *Mother* over Jane Austen's female characters. She says to Mr. Nahvi, the archvillain: "I am not comparing you to Elizabeth Bennet. There is nothing of her in you, to be sure—you are as different as man and mouse." The "good" professor, who appreciates Austen and Western characters, and the "bad" Iranian of today, who dislikes them, appear to be locked in eternal fight. What about the vast range of other Iranians who fall somewhere in between?

Reading Lolita in Tehran banishes what it cannot deal with. For example, it celebrates the power of literature for the women who gather to read the forbidden texts (although it would not have to have been as secretly as the book suggests) as evidence of women's resilience in the face of a revived patriarchy in post-1979 Iran. The least the book could do would be to mention a few contemporary Iranian women writers. It makes no such reference. The reader will not know that at the time this memoir was written, such prominent Iranian women writers as Shahrnush Parsipur, Simin Daneshvar, Moniru Ravanipur, and Simin Behbahani, to mention only a few, captured the imagination of readers and made it to the best-seller list in Iran. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*'s narration of postrevolutionary Iran, such complex and towering Iranian women do not exist.

Further, despite favoring democratization of the Middle East, ghost stories refrain from addressing repression when conducted by the United States (for example, the toppling of Mohammad Mosaddeq, the democratically elected Iranian premier, with the help of the CIA in the early 1950s, or the behavior of governments deemed allies of the United States toward their own citizens). Indeed, the way this literature navigates its way through the Middle Eastern mess without running into the U. S. presence there is astounding. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, for example, makes no reference to the coup ousting Mosaddeq, despite highlighting the anti-American orientation of the 1979 revolution that was widely understood to be fostered by the CIA's role in the coup. Neither is there any mention of chemical and other weapons used on Iranians and Kurds, with no objec-

tions at the time from Western democracies, during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

AT THE LOW END of the scale, the New Orientalist narrative not only draws on the ghosts of our fears but also harbors grotesque errors and generalizations bordering on the absurd. In *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (Anchor Books, 1995), the prize-winning author and journalist Geraldine Brooks turns into a linguist. Commenting on the "tribal" connections among the roots of Arabic words, Brooks suggests that the word for "mother" has a common root with words that mean many things, including "stupid," "illiterate," "parasite," and "without opinion." A larger outcome of that supposed linguistic ambivalence is said to be ignorance of religion, because "the nature of the Arabic language meant that a precise translation of the Koran was unobtainable."

Irshad Manji, a Canadian television host and author, plays social scientist and historian in *The Trouble With Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (St. Martin's Press, 2004), finding one of "the troubles with Islam today" to be the way it distorts history. "Growing up," Manji writes, she never "heard Abraham's name in a history lesson." Elsewhere she indicates that Muslims are not allowed to think for themselves, but only to imitate the behavior of the prophet.

The verdict—extended to more than a billion Muslims—is based partly on a report published by the religious academy in Manji's town that suggests that Muslims view the prophet as a perfect example. The author deals with specialized topics such as the chronology of the Koran in equally simplistic ways, assuming that since she cannot understand it, no other Muslim does. From that she argues that ignorance about the Koran leads to global tragedy. Had Mohamed Atta known that the *hur* promised to him by the Koran could refer to "white raisins" and not "dark-eyed virgins," the September 11 tragedy might have been avoided. From Manji's perspective, trying to understand political conflict, extremism, or injustice is unnecessary.

Don't hold your breath, either, for the "scholarly" versions of the New Orientalist discourse. They replicate the disturbing features of their popular counterparts. Bernard Lewis's recent work *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford University Press, 2002) lumps together the entire Muslim Middle East as "a culture" in turmoil in order to contrast it with Christian Europe as the epitome of progress. Generally speaking, Lewis, a well-known scholar of Near Eastern studies, is hostile to his subject: the modern Middle Eastern Muslim. Omid Safi, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, counts, in an essay in the fifth volume of *Voices of Islam* (Praeger Publishers, 2007), 14 demeaning qualifiers, such as "poor," "weak," "ignorant," "humiliating," "corrupt," "impoverished," "weary," and "shabby," on one page. The menacing tone of Lewis's discourse, perpetuated in his punitive narrating voice, scolds Muslim subjects at every turn for their "fall" from glory. At the same time, while their supposed rage, ignorance, and incompetence are made hypervisible, a kind of background noise setting the ghostly ambience, they rarely speak for themselves. The absence of Muslim voices and commentators comes across as a natural function of their lack of dynamism and agency.

With Muslim women, matters are even simpler. Silenced twice (by local culture and by Western narrative), Muslim women are elusive subjects in many Western histories of the Middle East. Historians make an effort to seek them in documents that capture smaller moments of personal exchange, like court records; deeds

of charitable foundations, called *waqf*, that they owned; or biographical sources on transmitters of sayings of the prophet, called *hadith*. More often, in their flowing black chadors and locked inside a proverbial harem, women are favorite candidates to be made hypervisible and yet totally masked: perfect ghosts. Lewis, for example, cites their low status in the Muslim world as "probably the most profound single difference between the two civilizations." Legally, he places them categorically below the unbelievers and slaves. Members of the other two groups can improve their status, but women will always be women.

Lewis documents the plight of women through uninformed comments of a handful of men about a handful of other men. There is Evliya Çelebi, the 17th-century Ottoman traveler who expressed surprise that the Austrian emperor stopped his horse on the street to let a woman pass. The Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi, in his opera *Aida*, told the story of the Egyptian Radames, torn between his love for the Egyptian princess Amneris and the Ethiopian slave Aida. To Verdi, a European

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Christian, Radames had to face the tragedy of choosing between the two women. What he didn't understand, says Lewis, is that his Egyptian hero would not have been faced with a problem: He could have possessed both women. Lewis also gives us the Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who blamed the deposed shah for women's immodest clothing and social activities. Such comments "document" the backward social status of the Ottoman, Egyptian, and Iranian women. The women themselves are not quoted and discussed.

Lewis closes with prescribing for the ghost a dose of the liberty enjoyed by those "schooled in the theory and practice of Western freedom." The list of recommended freedoms is long, but it does not include the one on the minds of Middle Easterners these days: freedom from military intrusion.

AS IN MANY OTHER PLACES in the Middle East, in Iran new and less-known players appear on the scene if today's culture is allowed to come into full view. Again, the case of women is instructive. Shahrnush Parsipur, born in 1946, is a powerful postrevolutionary author of many successful novels, including *The Dog and the Long Winter* (1976) and *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night* (1989). Parsipur is also the author of *Women Without Men: A Novella*, which she composed after the 1979 revolution and which Syracuse University Press translated in 1998. I purchased the latter two novels in Iran last summer, although they are supposedly "banned." In *Women Without Men*, she gives us Zarrinkolah, the charming prostitute. Shortly after

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the onset of the revolution, Parsipur's women are out to "see the world," and no one is going to stop them. When Zarrinkolah, a "little woman of 26 with a heart open like the sea," decides to leave the brothel, she needs no one's permission, no blessing from a holy man. She is her own source of holiness, the ray of light that brightens the brothel's miserable life. A holy prostitute in postrevolutionary Iran has to be a miracle, you say. But that is exactly the point. Postrevolutionary Iran has towering women writers who make miracles possible. Parsipur has since left for exile in the United States. But her books still have an enormous following that cannot simply be dropped from the picture of Iranian history and contemporary cultural life. Iranian women have figures like her to look to for a sense of empowerment.

Parsipur is one of many. A few decades before the revolution, and before Parsipur's generation made its presence felt, Simin Danishvar—born in 1921 and still living in Iran—had captured the imagination of thousands of Iranian readers. Her beautifully crafted novel *Savushun* takes place in the historic city of Shiraz in southwestern Iran. It follows the life of a Persian family confronting change during World War II, through the eyes of a young wife and mother. It is one of Iran's all-time best sellers.

An equally powerful poetic voice in 20th-century Iran is that of Simin Behbahani, born in 1927 and affectionately known to her followers as the lioness of Iran. A major literary figure before and after the revolution, she is also known for her activism and outspoken dedication to women's rights. She is currently president of the Iranian Writers' Association. During the Iran-Iraq war, Behbahani wrote passionately in favor of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. In 1997 she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Many of these writers view themselves as citizens of

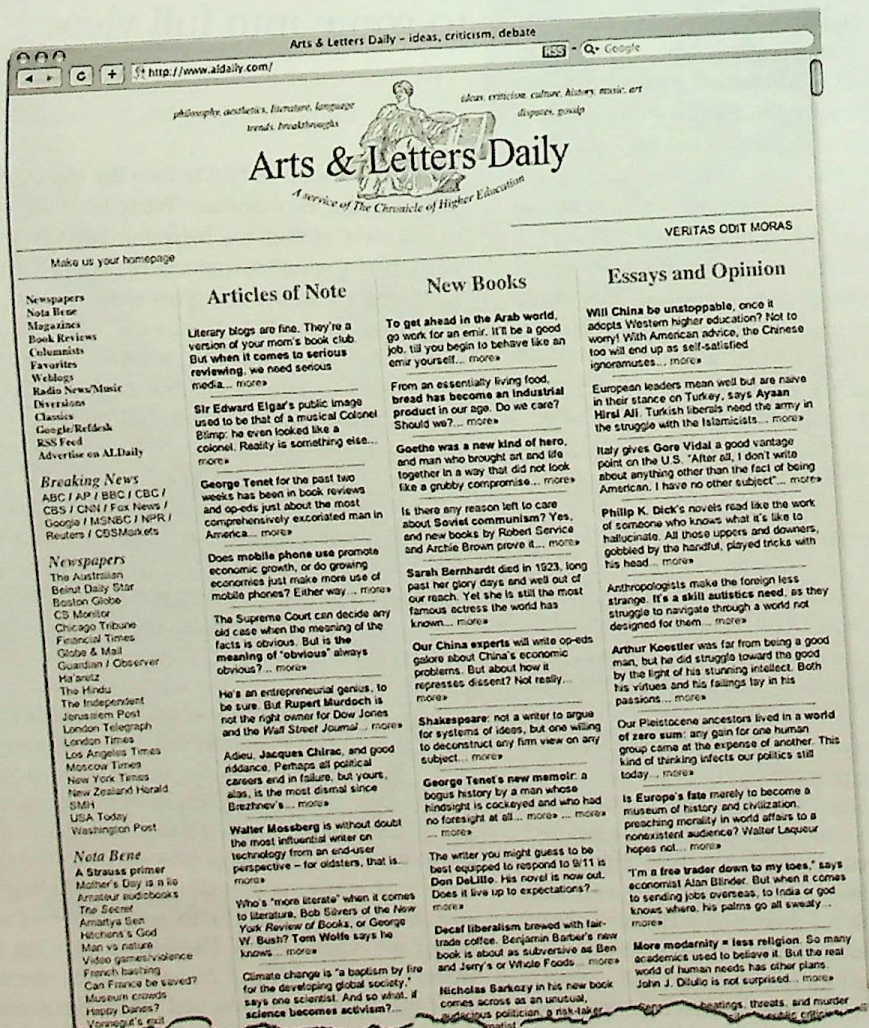
the world, and they have identities that are hybrid. Such identities are part of our evolving global society, which demands new ways of knowing and writing about one another: as a kaleidoscope of colors, accents, and vantage points. Unless we learn about less-explored cultures, those colors and vantage points will remain beyond our reach. Few Western readers and scholars would look up the exquisite poetry of the prominent 20th-century Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad, who died in 1967, in a bookstore, or include her work in a world-literature or gender-studies course. It has to grow roots and bloom in the culture before the seeds are carried to new gardens.

Farrokhzad's beautifully crafted poem "Frontier Walls" is her poetic manifesto, her philosophy of life. In the light of the candle she carries, she and readers leave behind the walls that separate them and see the wholeness of human experience:

Return with me to that star,
Return with me
To that star far away
from the frozen seasons of the earth and its
ways to measure and understand
Where no one fears light.

Return with me
To the start of creation
To the fragrant core of a fertilized egg
To the moment I was born from you
Return with me, you have left me incomplete.

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