“Showing Our Shit”: Representations by Muslim Writers of the Diaspora Experience

MA Thesis Written By
Amir Al-Azraki
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Selinus University of Sciences and Literature
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
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Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of Islam and Muslims in selected Muslim writings. It delves into the entanglement between diaspora, Islam and identity, and raises questions about the writer’s responsibility in exposing or portraying unwelcomed and unfavorable ‘truths’ about his/her community. It consists of seven chapters. Chapter one outlines the characteristics of the Muslim diasporic writings and discusses the problematic representation of Islam and Muslims in these writings. Chapter Two provides an overview of the concept of diaspora, its definition, types and history. Chapter Three examines the factors and complex tapestry of Muslims in diaspora. Chapter Four tackles the issue of fundamentalism and secularism in Ed Husain’s *The Islamist* and Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*. Chapter Five analyzes the representation of Muslims in Pakistan and the UK in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*. The penultimate chapter investigates the Islamic Law and religious oppression in Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. The last chapter encompasses some concluding remarks.
I. Muslim Diasporic Writings: An Introduction

In “Diaspora and Multiculturalism”, Victor J. Ramraji postulates that diasporic writing is usually about “people who are linked by common histories of uprooting and dispersal, common homelands, and common cultural heritages” (299). Their hybrid existence is characterized by a ‘split narrative’ or a ‘split personality’ that co-exists between the past and the present: the past with its ‘history’, ‘tradition’, ‘memories’ and the present with its diasporic and exilic experiences. Diasporic writings encapsulate a wide range of diasporic experiences such as homesickness, displacement, dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, loneliness, isolation, survival, non-belongingness, identity crisis etc.

In an attempt to clarify the term “Muslim Writings”, Rehana, Morey and Yaqin raise two questions: “Is Muslim writing to be understood as the preserve of those authors self-identifying as Muslim, or those for whom the rituals and the inner promptings of faith are the heart of their sense of identity?” (3). The examples I am analyzing apply to both categories.

In many Muslim diasporic writings, the protagonists, feeling isolated, alienated, targeted, outcast, and unable to belong, often look for belonging to either their cultural roots or their religious roots (Islam). Their journey of return usually ends
in either disillusionment or in more diasporic experiences, where they are stuck in a temporary state of in-betweenness, a third place, or as Homi K. Bhabha calls it, a ‘liminal’ space.

An analysis of, for instance, *The Islamist, The Road from Damascus*, and *Lipstick Jihad*, shows how the protagonists’ disillusionment occurs, and their sense of exile is exacerbated, when they discover that even in their imagined motherland (Muslim lands) they are still strangers and foreigners. This is because the current reality of Islam in their homelands either conflicts with their imagined/ideal Islam or suppresses their quest for belonging. The exception here is Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*, where the protagonist’s journey, seeking belonging in his cultural roots, starts in secularism and ends in finding meaning and connection in a ‘moderate’ version of Islam, practised outside the Muslims’ motherland, in the UK.

Muslim writers who present a disapproving picture of Islam and Muslim societies, based on their experiences (e.g., *Reading Lolita in Tehran*), are often labelled by other Muslim intellectuals and writers as traitors and compradors, whose writing, regardless of its accuracy and truthfulness, contributes to the neo-orientalist discourse and the demonized image of Muslims in the West. On the
other hand, we have Muslim writers whose writings contain counter-narratives that challenge the dominant stereotypes prevalent in the West’s hegemonic discourse (e.g. Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf). But the question that arises here is: what is the purpose of art? Is it a vehicle for propaganda/social conditioning? Can it be neutral? Art, especially literature, while not explicitly functioning as “propaganda” in the pejorative sense, nonetheless often serves to “propagate” or privilege a set of values or a way of seeing and judging.

In examining the representation of Islam and Muslims in selected Muslim writings, this thesis probes into the entanglement between diaspora, Islam and identity. It inquires into the responsibility of the writer in holding “the mirror up to nature” and showing unwelcomed and unfavorable ‘truths’ about his/her community.

In several Muslim writings that are not considered as ‘pro-Western’, Islam and Muslims are still negatively portrayed. The examples I am analysing are controversially debated by Muslim scholars and critics regarding the representation of Islam and Muslims. These writings include Ed Husain’s The Islamist, Robin Yassin-Kassab’s The Road from Damascus, Nadeem Aslam’s Maps for Lost Lovers, Azadeh Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad, and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis.
Investigating such problematic issues as accuracy, neutrality and their connectedness to (mis)representing Muslim and Islam, the reader should understand the differences between and peculiarities of Muslims who live in the West and those who live in the Muslim countries. I argue that the misrepresentation occurs when Muslims in the West think of, thus represent and speak of, those Muslims in the Muslim countries. Similarly, misrepresentation can also occur when the West perceives and represents Muslims in the West through the same lenses and filters, they perceive those in the Muslim countries.

Although eastern and western Muslims generally share the same religion and certain practices, they are still different: their political, economic, cultural environments are totally different. One cannot speak of them as one identical group just because they, for instance, pray five times a day, which not all of them do anyway. Even if they share some basic beliefs and practices, Muslims in diaspora and at home are not alike. Given the diversity of religiosity and other cultural and ethnic factors, one should not catalogue Muslims in, for instance, Pakistan and those in Syria or Lebanon, as one group, or perceive Muslims in Saudi Arabia in the same way they see, say, Iranian Muslims in the USA.
On the other hand, lacking personal experience and insight into the reality of the Middle East is another issue. One can use the same argument used to criticize the so-called “compradors”, and ask those Muslim critics, who are mostly privileged professors/scholars living in the West: “Have you lived in the Muslim countries long enough to distinguish what is accurate representation and what is not?” “Have you ever experienced what Muslim men and women go through every day in those countries?” Going to those countries for a conference or a workshop, surrounded by academics, is not the same experience as living there.

While one cannot deny the danger in overgeneralizing the representation of Muslims in works based on personal experiences, on the other hand, concealing the truth based on those personal experiences, just to prevent it from contributing to the ‘neo-orientalist’ discourse, could be ethically problematic, and it speaks to the agenda of the artist. As intellectuals, artists and writers, we have a responsibility to raise awareness about human rights violations and the adoption of bigoted and prejudiced attitudes both in the West and in the Muslim countries, whether perpetrated by ‘us’ or by ‘them’. Also, we, artists and intellectuals in exile, have the advantage, as Said puts it, of a ‘double perspective’ and ‘juxtaposition’ where “an idea or experience is counterposed with another,
therefore, making them both appear in sometimes new and unpredictable light” (60).

II. Diaspora: An Overview

The problem of defining “diaspora” consists in its inconsistently changing semantics and applications throughout history. The change usually occurs when studying the circumstances, causes and effects, pros and cons, of diaspora in various diasporic communities, and their connection between their hyphenated identities with their real/imagined homelands. In this section, I will try to narrow down the definition of diaspora, its history, causes, conditions and consequences.

The study of diaspora has gone through several phases. In Chapter One of Global Diaspora (2008), Cohen explores four phases of diaspora: Classical use: a traumatized group victimized by a cruel oppressor (e.g., the Jewish experience); 1980s: diaspora was used as a metaphorical designation (e.g., expatriates, expellees, political refugees etc.); 1990s: diaspora was deterritorialized and constructed and deconstructed in relation to homeland and religious/ethnic community; and 21st century/consolidation phase: marked by a revised confirmation of the diasporic idea, its essential elements, common features and ideal types (Cohen 1-2).
Etymologically, the word ‘diaspora’, as defined by the Online Etymology Dictionary, comes from a Greek word “diaspeirein”: “dia” means ‘across or about’ and “speirein” to ‘scatter’ (“diaspora”). It also refers to the scattering of seeds and their taking root in new soils. Historically, diaspora was first mentioned in the Deuteronomy 28: 25 “Thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth”, to refer to the dispersion of the Jews from Israel during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities in the 8th and 6th century BCE. Three stages characterise the spiritual anguish caused by being dispersed, or the galut (Hebrew/Yiddish word for diaspora), by an angry God: exile, suffering, and return.

Fig.1 “The destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E”. Picture by W.A. Foster. *New World Encyclopedia*. 24 October 2017.
The word ‘diaspora’ was used later to describe the dispersal of the Armenians by the Ottoman empire and of Africans who were forced to leave their lands to be enslaved by the colonizers. While African diaspora dates back to the great exodus and later to the first migration of the Bantu people from West Africa in 3000 BCE, the recent movement of African diaspora started in the 15th century with the Atlantic trade in African slaves at the hands of the European colonizers, long after the Arab slave trade ended. In *Making the Black Atlantic: Britain and the African Diaspora* (2016), James Walvin states that “The process of transporting enslaved African peoples, the consequent reshaping of those peoples in their enforced exiles, has become known as the African diaspora” (2).

Fig.2 “Freed slaves, 1862”. Photograph by Henry P. Moore. *Essential Civil War Curriculum*
As for the types of diaspora, Cohen differentiates between five kinds of diasporas: the "victim diasporas: Africans and Armenians " (dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations), "labour diasporas, indentured labourers" (Indians), "imperial diasporas" (British), "trade diasporas" (Chinese and Lebanese), and "cultural diasporas" (the Caribbean) (Cohen 2). Regardless of the different reasons behind each kind of diaspora, those diasporic communities share some common features: dispersal to two or more locations; collective mythology of homeland; alienation from homeland; idealization of return to homeland; and ongoing relationship with homeland (Safran 83-4).

III. Muslim Diaspora

The complexity of the Muslim diaspora, or diasporas, stems from the diverse factors and changing conditions that shape the contours of Muslim communities in diaspora. Some of these factors are internal such as ethnicity (e.g., Arabs, Turks, Indians etc.), nationality (e.g., Egyptian-French, Iraqi-British...etc.), dominant culture (e.g., French, British, American etc.), language (e.g., Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish), sectarian (e.g., Sunni, Shi’ite), class, age, length of each group’s
history; and some are external factors that are related to the receiving or the host society, such as level of social, economic, and cultural development, political system, immigration and settlement policies, the degrees of cultural tolerance and acceptance of difference. These factors may lead to “a polarization of positions” and consequently to “a heightened sense of separate Muslim identity in the diaspora, which need not always be a reflection of an increasing turn to fundamentalist religious belief” (Ahmed et al. 9).

Furthermore, the diversity of the Muslim populations, such as the existence of various sects and subsects and various interpretations of Islam, adds more complexity to the Muslim diaspora. The western media often depict Muslims in diaspora through stereotypical misconceptions: they are grouped into one category regardless of their diversity. In fact, Muslims cannot be classified into one group (extremist or conservative) simply because Muslims’ level of religiosity can vary from orthodox believers (minority), and practising individuals, to non-practising skeptics, secular, and atheists.

Despite the mosaic of diversity of Muslims in the West, there are some unifying factors, brought about by shared events, that bring Muslims in diaspora (s) together such as 9/11, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the war with Israel
and the suffering of the Palestinians. These events have politicized Muslims and hence unified them in various “forms/acts of protest, or in an expressive sense of connection and solidarity” (Moghissi et al.11). Essentially, they are unified by “the sense of being deported to the culture of not-belonging, of becoming a permanent target for stereotyping and bigotry,” and by “the political objections to the west’s hegemonic role and the experience of social and cultural exclusion” (14).

Fig.3 “The challenges of being Muslim in America today”. Photograph by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. *The New Arab*. 13 March 2017.
As for the experiences of Muslim women in diaspora, they, compared with Muslim men in diaspora, are often considered as a minority within a minority. Perceived through stereotypes, they are usually categorized as one group regardless of their personal, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. One of the common characteristics associated with Muslim women is to be submissive and give into oppressive male authority. Also, a veiled Muslim woman is considered to have values that are considered too foreign and different for the host society (Bendriss 190).

Moreover, Naima Bendriss highlights the processes of ethnicization and racialization, and how this categorizing reinforces stereotypes and stigmas against Muslim women that make it extremely challenging for them to integrate into the society. She exposes the two common misguided associations of the "typical Muslim woman" being, as mentioned above, the submissive victim to the violent Muslim male counterpart, or the "veiled anti-hero, inferior to the modern, emancipated female counterpart of the West” (190-191).

Furthermore, many Muslim women who live in diaspora resist the oppression, discrimination, and marginalization they experience from both the West and the ethnic and religious communities to which they belong. Occupying a third space,
space in between, they negotiate their unique Muslim identity and liberty through perspicacious strategies such as re-interpreting and re-contextualizing Islamic texts.

On the other hand, how are Muslim women depicted in their homelands? This question will be tackled later in, for instance, Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, and Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad*.

**IV. The Islamist and The Road from Damascus: Fundamentalism, Secularism and False Islam**

Robin Yassin-Kassab, born to a Syrian father and English mother, is a Syrian-British author and commentator. Born in west London in 1969, Robin graduated from Oxford University and became a journalist, and currently he teaches English in Oman. He is the author of *The Road from Damascus* and co-author of *Burning Country* (Yassin-Kassb, “Qunfuz”)

Born in 1974, raised up in Limehouse (in east London), Ed (a short version of Mohamed given to him by students) Husain was brought up in a Bangladeshi family following Sufi traditions. After finishing primary school, he attended a predominantly Bangladeshi Muslim secondary school called Stepney Green where
he felt like an outsider and was overwhelmed by the Bengali gang culture. After secondary school, he joined the Young Muslim Organization, and later attended the Tower Hamlets College and became the president of the Islamic Society there. Husain finished his master’s degree in Middle Eastern Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, and joined the Labour Party. He went to Syria to study Arabic, then to Saudi Arabia to work for the British Council. He occupied various positions, and now he is “a senior adviser at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, specializing in Islamist movement, the Middle East and counter-terrorism policy (The Guardian “Ed Husain”).

While Yassin Kassab’s novel The Road from Damascus explores the exilic experiences of Sami Traifi, a British-Syrian young man growing up in North London, Ed Husain’s memoir The Islamist records the author’s own experiences as a young Bangladeshi-Muslim male growing up in East London in the 1980s. In the novel and the memoir, the characters experience diaspora in similar ways: while Husain’s exile starts in his high school (Stepney Green), then within a Muslim society (Saudi Arabia), Sami’s exile starts in school, then later in his homeland, Syria. However, whereas in The Islamist, Islam is presented in Husain’s three phases: fundamentalist Islam (in college in the UK), false or corrupt (Saudi Arabia),
and moderate (practised by the majority of British Muslims in the UK), in *The Road from Damascus*, Islam is depicted through Sami’s character who first despises and rejects it, but later embraces it as the best to belong to and find meaning in his life from.

Husain, who goes to Stepney Green, where the students are mostly Muslim, feels left out and bullied by his classmates. His classmates, primarily new immigrants from Bangladesh, talk about things he feels too British to relate to. Being bullied, Husain turns into an introvert. Similarly, schoolboy Sami always feels like “someone foreign”, ashamed of his Arab facial features, hair and skin color; his features “were too big, too expressive of his English-style emotions” (*The Road from Damascus* 14).

While at school, Husain is gradually being exposed to religion. Unable to make friends, he gets close to a friend named Brother Faileek, and together they begin to study Islam. In this phase, Islam is introduced to Husain as a holistic system of living, directing every aspect of life including politics.

Sami, on the other hand, is fond of Arab poetry, its secularism and eroticism which “contributed to the sexiness of his Arabism” (14-15). Influenced by his deceased secular father and his acclaimed work “The Secular Arab
Consciousness”, Sami is a passionate and uncompromising atheist. For his father, Arabs “had no need of religion to make them great”; the Islamic period of Arab history is “a falling off from previous glory”; and, Islam is a “morass” into which the priests of the old religions and the desert-poets and prophets stumbled and sank (15).

Unlike Sami, Husain’s father is very religious and is the disciple of a religious leader in Bangladesh. Husain decides to join the Young Muslim Organization (YMO). Praised and taken care of by his surrounding group, Husain feels more attached to Islam. The attention given to him is something he lacked when he was an alienated schoolboy. This could be seen as a recruiting tactic of young people into extremists groups.

Then, Husain joins Tower Hamlets College, a school dominated by a South Asian Muslim community, where he is elected as the president of the Islamic Society which is propagating conservative and extremist views such as “anti-gay” rhetoric, and boycotting a disco on campus.

When the 1992 Bosnian genocide takes place, Husain decides to shift his attention from a local perspective into a broader one: the international “ummah”, the global Muslim community. So he leaves YMO and joins Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). In
this stage, Islam is presented, not as just a religion, but as a political ideology and the only guidance and code of conduct for society: “We were committed to gradual Islamicization, and being pragmatic and gradual was crucial to us. This, on the whole, was based on realpolitik, and had no scriptural support” (The Islamist 89).

Later, two incidents happen that make Husain quit his association with the HT and move on with his life. Firstly, he is removed from the presidency of the Islamic Society by YMO, and then evicted from a mosque while preaching on behalf of HT. Secondly, a Nigerian-British Christian student is stabbed to death, which makes Husain feel guilt-ridden since the reason behind such an incident was the extremist discourse adopted by HT, a discourse that promotes Muslims’ superiority to others (kuffars: non-believers). Husain quits HT, graduates, gets married and finds a well-paid job. Soon after, he quits his job and gradually embraces ‘moderate’ Islam, Sufism in particular, cutting his connections with radical Islamism.

The other diasporic experience occurs when Husain and his wife go to Jeddah to teach English and study Arabic. In Saudi Arabia, he feels alienated, and his diasporic expectation of the ideal Islam and Islamic State vanishes. Husain, going
from a fundamentalist Muslim community in the UK into a false and corrupt Muslim country, is shocked by the Saudi students’ reactions towards terrorism: celebrating terrorist attacks in the west such as the London 7/7 attacks.

His feeling of isolation and disillusionment is increased by the widespread racism, disrespect for women, the imposition of the veil and gender separation, sex trafficking, and the raping of women of non-Saudi background or lower economic status. Unlike what he has imagined, Muslims in the “Muslims’ motherland” (Saudi Arabia) do not follow what Islam preaches.

Unable to belong to such a society, he decides to return to London, but even there he feels the lack of belonging. Returning to London, Husain thinks that, although radical Islamism is on the rise, most British Muslims follow the moderate Islam, the “normal” and “mainstream” Islam, where they reject the oppression of women and other extremist views, but also reject the western social norms of drinking and gambling.

Unlike Husain’s lack of belonging which makes him chase his religious roots, Sami’s lack of belonging leads him to pursue his cultural roots, Arab roots. Whereas Husain’s longing for an imaginative and figurative “Islamic State” is crushed by the corruption and wrongdoings of Muslims in the motherland, Sami’s
ideal image of homeland ("beards disappeared ...the headscarf tide was reversed, and hair breathed freely" p.3) is shattered by corruption and political and religious oppression.

V. **Maps for Lost Lovers: Muslims in Pakistan and the UK**

Born in 1966 in Gujranwala in Pakistan, Nadeem Aslam emigrated as a teenager to the UK at the age of 14. Fleeing President Zia’s regime, Aslam’s father, a Communist, a poet and a film producer, settled with his family in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. Aslam, then, enrolled at the University of Manchester to study biochemistry but left to become a writer (Aslam, Britishcouncil.org). His debut novel, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993) won the Betty Trask and the Author’s Club Best First Novel awards, and his second novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) won the Kiriyama Prize and the Encore Award.

*Maps for Lost Lovers* is a story of the disappearance of two lovers, Jugnu (well-educated and well-travelled lepidopterist) and Chanda (his younger lover and a daughter of a shopkeeper) in Dash-et-Tanhaii (Desert of Loneliness), a town in northern England, where Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are surrounded by ‘godless’ and ‘racist’ white society. The story is unfolded by Jugnu’s bother Shamas (a
cultured, free-thinking poet and director of the Community Relations Council) and his wife Kaukab (a Pakistani-Muslim cleric’s conservative daughter). Although their bodies have not been discovered, Chanda’s brothers are arrested for the murder of the two lovers.

*Maps for Lost Lovers* depicts substantial issues that stem from the problematic struggle of an immigrant community to integrate and adapt. In “Cultural Hybridity in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*”, Shahbaz Arif and Nighat Parveen postulate:

An inability to embrace this newness or a refusal to adapt to a new life in the West could, according to Nadeem Aslam, ultimately destroy the migrant as is observed in the case of Kaukab; and ability to valorize interstitial places helps the migrants to establish themselves in the centre, as is manifested through Kaukab’s children (Arif and Nighat 61).

In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, a diasporic Muslim community, the Pakistani community in particular, is explored through such sensitive issues as honor killing, violence against women, religious extremism, forced marriages, racism and paedophilia. In an interview published in the *Independent*, Aslam says "A woman
in one Pakistani province is killed every 38 hours," which is something reiterated clearly in the novel:

A Pakistani man mounted the footpath and ran over his sister-in-law repeatedly, in broad daylight—because he suspected she was cheating on his brother...this was here in England, and according to the statistics, in one Pakistani province alone, a woman is murdered every thirty-eight hours solely because her virtue is in doubt. (*Maps* 139).

Also, Aslam points out that each shocking incident in the book is based on a true case. Commenting on his characters, he says that "The characters are constantly comparing England with Pakistan... They do it so much that they don't see their life in England" (Aslam). For Shamas, Jugnu’s brother, “Pakistan is not only a wife-beating country, it’s a wife-murdering one” (*Maps*, 226).

Paedophilia is another taboo subject touched on in the novel. In fact, in many paedophilic cases reported in the UK in particular and the West in general, the victims’ families are forced to withdraw or are silenced in an attempt to avoid public shame in their community. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Shamas, for instance, tells us that “semen was found on the mosque floor last evening” where he walks
in on a junior cleric, “a bachelor in his fifties, with his erect penis in a child’s mouth” (234).

Moreover, Islam as conservative and regressive is portrayed through the character of Kaukab, Shamas’ wife. Fearful, suspicious, and blindly adherent to Islam, she thinks of England as an “unsacred country full of people filthy with disgusting habits and practices” (273), and refuses to breastfeed her infant during Ramadan. Her narrow-minded devotion to Islam and Pakistani traditions, and her racist and prejudiced attitude towards white people, have made her lonely, alienated and unable to keep her family together. Her children, resisting Islamic and Pakistani traditions, challenge her authority and oppression and eventually become strangers to her.

Her older son, Charag, rebuffing his mother’s matchmaking efforts to marry a Pakistani Muslim woman, falls in love with a white woman. Her daughter, Mah-Jabin, is forced by Kaukab to marry an abusive Pakistani cousin, who divorces her. Ujala, her rebellious younger son, leaves home at the age of 16 upon discovering that his mother was feeding him powder with bromide in it. Kaukab took that powder from a cleric to calm down her son but was unaware of the bromide in the powder.
Islam is also criticized by Jugnu, Shamas’ brother. Invited with his white girlfriend for dinner at his brother’s house, he makes a bold statement in front of Kaukab and his brother: “The fact of the matter is that had I lived at the time of Muhammad, and he came to me with his heavenly message, I would have walked away” (38). For Kaukab, Jugnu is a sinful man for criticizing Islam, and for being with a white girlfriend whom she hates, and later, for living with Chanda outside the sacred marriage relationship.

Honor killing is another contentious issue explored in the novel. The lovers in the novel, Jugnu and Chanda are believed to be murdered by Chanda’s brothers who are arrested later by the police. We are told that the brothers killed the couple to wipe out the shameful stain of Chanda’s adultery. For many Muslims in the novel, the brothers/murderers are two devoted men who have to suffer to for their virtuous deed: “He whom a taunt or jeer doesn’t kill is probably immune to even swords” (197). In “Muslims as Multicultural Misfits in Nadeem Aslam’s Maps for Lost Lovers”, Amina Yaqin, criticizing the novel as “as crude as those tabloid caricatures” which speak “of a pre-9/11 culture of not belonging”, argues:

Underwritten by the specificity of the Pakistani context, it explores the stories behind the stereotype of Muslim women as victims of
honor crimes and presents us with transnational identifications amongst his characters born out of the complex relationships to gender, race, class and ethnicity (104).

Although she denies that the novel is about Islamism or honor crimes, Yaqin concludes that Aslam’s style is characterized by the British left liberalism in the sense that “it deliberately critiques a conservative Islamic consciousness to underline progressive secular principles and in doing so flattens the complexities of faith-based identities” (114).

VI. Lipstick Jihad and Persepolis: Islamic Law and Religious Oppression

Born in California in 1976, Azadeh Moaveni is an Iranian-American writer and journalist. Growing up in San Jose, she joined the University of California to study politics, then joined The American University in Cairo to study Arabic. She worked as a reporter for Time Magazine and The Los Angeles Times. She is the author of Lipstick Jihad and Honeymoon in Tehran, and the co-author of Iran Awakening with Shirin Ebadi.

Born in Iran in 1969, Marjane Satrapi is an Iranian-French graphic novelist, cartoonist, illustrator, film director, and children's book author. She grew up in
Tehran, but fearing the new Islamic regime, in 1984 her family sent her to study in Austria. Feeling alienated and exilic, she returned to Iran at the age of 19 to study art and then get married, but her marriage did not last long, so she moved to France and stayed there permanently.

Though they differ as to genre, both Moaveni’s Lipstick Jihad and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis portray an authoritarian picture of Islam under the Iranian Islamic regime. Moaveni’s memoir covers the author’s journey from her homeland in California to her “true homeland”, Iran, as it is based on memories of summer vacations and her relatives’ recollection of Iran. On the other hand, Persepolis, a graphic autobiographical novel, portrays the author’s journey from Iran, as a child of a Marxist family, to exile in Vienna, and subsequent return to Iran. Both authors suffer identity crises and the inability to belong anywhere; they live in a third space, a temporary state of in-betweenness.

Born in California, Moaveni visited Iran before the Islamic Revolution took place in 1979. As she is growing up, she connects with her Iranian identity and returns to Iran as a journalist. Unable to belong and integrate completely into American society, she returns to Iran in an attempt to connect with her cultural
roots, only to discover that she is an outsider there too. She can feel at home neither in Iran nor America.

In “Next Generation Iranian-American Memoir Writers: Azadeh Moaveni and Firoozeh Dumas”, Daniel Grassian notes Moaveni’s observations that most Iranians have come to the conclusion that the clerics have economically devastated, if not ruined, Iran, “in the name of Islam” (114). Moaveni recounts her interview with one of the high ranking clerics:

One really could not have a proper conversation with a cleric ... A one-hour interview with a mullah inevitably cycled like so: First fifteen minutes: Gaze averted, stares at own feet, wall, space, anywhere but two-foot radius around opposing female. Second fifteen minutes: Slowly casts glances in direction of head and talking voice. Third fifteen minutes: Makes eye contact and conducts normal conversation. Last fifteen minutes: Begins making googly eyes, smiling in impious fashion, and requesting one's mobile phone number (Lipstick Jihad 100)

In Lipstick Jihad, Moaveni portrays the corruptness, greed, gratuitous cruelty and hypocrisy of the ruling regime. The oppression and restrictiveness lead to secret/private permissiveness and defiance of the regime, and people are
obsessed with all that is forbidden – i.e. sex, alcohol and drugs, revealing dress, freedom, the West, democracy.

Struggling with exile is shown clearly throughout the memoir. In California, Moaveni lives in two worlds: at home, she serves and drinks tea with saffron and dreams of Tehran, but outside she practises yoga and listens to Madonna. While her mother tries to preserve her Iranian culture, her childhood is filled with both cultures mingling in as she compares her mother's behaviour with her American friend's parents. While in the US, her view is conflicted: Iran is a beautiful and mighty country, a place of light, poetry and nightingales, but it is also a place controlled by a dark, evil force called the Islamic Revolution.

Moreover, the recollections of Iran from her relatives based in the U.S., and her mother's help to refugees from Muslim countries, continuously remind her of Iran and its culture, along with the summer vacation spent there which creates a superficial image of Iran that she longs for. Her exile is from the perspective of a second generation because she was not born in Iran, and California was her actual homeland. Yet, the environment she grew up in always had her feeling discomfort as she knew that she did not belong to the American landscape. Her mother could not bother herself with only "baking cookies" (Lipstick Jihad 8) like American
parents. The exilic feelings were transferred through her mother and the family diaspora between California and Iran.

The strength of the memoir is that Moaveni argues against the stereotyping of Iran, as an oppressed nation. Moaveni witnesses many expressions of freedom that she was previously unaware of. Among these incidents, the most striking are the events of the fashion show, people celebrating on the streets, and the issue of sexuality. These incidents highlight the rebellious attitude of Iranians and at the same time prove stereotypes associated with Iran wrong. Even Moaveni’s working and reporting on student demonstrations in Iran itself is the first proof of freedom (no matter how little) which leaves an altered impression of an oppressed Iran.

Moaveni’s stress on a fashion show is evident in her narration as she never thought it would be allowed in Iran. Though it was a “women only” (161) show, not even attended by the media, there was much buzz about it. The author admitted when she informed her international friends about the show, "no one believed" (161) her and she too believed that “there had been no fashion shows in Iran since 1979” (161). The very act of conducting a fashion show in the Islamic Republic was a retaliation against the restrictions set up by the regime. The fashion show also argues against the stereotype associated with Iran.
The younger generation experienced some freedom around the time of festivals such as Moharram, where teenage girls and boys exchanged phone numbers with each other by passing chits while lighting candles. Moaveni expresses her surprise at how “lucky fellow mourners were slipped numbers as they passed” (58). Moreover, these celebrations were a social gathering where people could interact freely even in the presence of Basij (the moral police). The juxtaposition of interaction between males and females under the pretence of a festival guarded by the regime's police sets up striking imagery of people's rebellion against the regime.

The more oppressive the Islamic regime became, the more people were tempted to resist enforcement. Tabooed topics attracted Iranians and Moaveni draws the audience's attention to the issue of sexuality among Iranians. The restriction on men and women being together, and on gestures of affection in public, increased the desire of Iranian youngsters to be involved in sexual relationships. However, these restrictions also created a confused perception of sex and relationships. Moaveni highlights this confusion as she writes about Iranian women and their confusion regarding relationships; the author addresses the dilemma asking “Could they afford to be honest about their sexuality, or should they be guarded, and play to the still-traditional expectations of Iranian
men” (186). Moaveni mirrors her confusion with the young Iranians with questions such as “What was it with young Iranians? How could they be so obsessed with sex, yet know so little about it?” (188) Although "progress [...] meant that men were now willing to marry women who slept with them during the dating phase [...] that didn't mean they would marry the ones who had acted as if they liked it", (189) which meant women were prevented from expressing their desires. The Islamic regime inculcates a paradoxical message:

the regime fed the young people contradictory messages: women are liberated but legally inferior; women should be educated but subservient; women should have careers but stick to traditional gender roles; women should play sports but ignore their dirty physical needs (179).

However, amidst all the breaking of stereotype and suffering of the people, Moaveni admits that what she sees comes from a privileged perspective. Moaveni belonged to an upper class, and her family had experienced the luxuries that other Iranian families did not. Although Moaveni’s memoir consists of her journey, the younger population of Iran plays an important role in representing both sides of oppression. Moreover, Moaveni’s status does not always provide
her with safety as she becomes a victim of an attack by the police and the interrogators. The weakness of this memoir is that it fails to serve the author’s purpose in returning to Iran. The author is unable to come to terms with the present Iran and finds her life constantly under the supervision of the regime, which suffocates her to the point of fleeing from her supposed true homeland. Though there was a certain amount of freedom where women could become reporters, could drive cars, and live on their own, the dilemma was "whether to observe the taboos and the restrictions or resist them, by living as if they didn't exist?" (74). Moaveni had enjoyed some benefits of belonging to an upper class, but the grip of the Islamic regime tightened and threatened to break the little freedom this class had.

The very Basij who patrol on public streets were brainwashed by the Islamic regime due to their poor background. Moaveni depicts two types of teenager in her memoir - one who is outgoing and rebelling against the regime and the other one who is manipulated by the regime to work under its name and suppress people. She writes, “many [Basij] are young, no older than fifteen, but their eyes shone with the eager rage of unrestrained bullies” (58). The ‘moral officers’ who were so young looked up to and displayed loyalty to the regime. Moaveni explains how brainwashing the upcoming generation of Iran was done through “careful
[selection] in the poorest neighbourhoods and the cultivation of violence with a skilful balance of brainwashing and small incentives” (59). With poor households targeted, the regime's control over the upcoming generation casts a grim outlook for the future where this generation, unaware of what freedom is, will be subservient to the regime. The ruthless tactics of the Islamic regime paint an image of the real Iran that shatters Moaveni’s previously dreamlike impression. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of one group of teenagers attacking another also heightens the conflicting perspective of Iranians towards the regime, where one side is blind to and even assisting the oppression, which the other is constantly fighting through their small acts of rebellion.

The police’s torture of people further shatters the illusion of the safety Moaveni’s status provided in Iran. While people were celebrating on the streets the international recognition of the Iranian soccer team, the merrymaking suddenly turned into a political retaliation. The police began hitting people who were on the streets and “a girl, about twelve” (214) was also hit. The police showed no mercy, even beating the writer and her friend who were mere witnesses to the scene. The brutal police serving the regime did not hesitate to strike back with batons when critical remarks were made by civilians. Even the innocent bystanders were hit, including women and children. Moaveni, who has
come from a much well-educated background, was also a victim of this attack, which imprints a bleak image of Iran in her mind.

Even though Moaveni was from a higher class, she is also subjected to the regime's restriction on freedom of expression as she is continuously interrogated by "Mr.X and Mr.Sleepy" who were “intelligence agents/interrogators,” (217) keeping in check what her articles stated about the regime. Moaveni recalls how “they would phone [her] mobile an hour before [they] were supposed to meet [...] insisted on knowing who the unknown sources were [...] tried to convince [her] that [she] needed [them], by planting fears in [her] mind” (118-119). Moreover, the officers mentioned her family, implying the vulnerable situation she and her family could be in if she retaliated directly against the regime. Until the United States of America’s attack on Afghanistan, Moaveni enjoyed a state of relative freedom in reporting, where she wrote about how “people were [fed up], hated the revolution” (227). After the attack, Mr.X was suddenly pressurizing her to stop reporting. The restriction, along with her information available to these officers, put her in a perilous position. In fact, the interrogation serves as a precipitating cause for her moving back to America.
In my opinion, Moaveni’s memoir serves as an accurate example of life under the Islamic regime from an outsider's perspective due to her exilic status. Her displacement from Iran provides the audience with a fresh point of view of the Islamic fundamentalists, and allows Iranians in exile to relate to her. The nostalgia for homeland, along with a current image of the homeland in a restricted atmosphere, tug at the heart of audience who can understand Moaveni’s conflict as she struggles to adapt to an Iran that is very different from her previously expected image.

To conclude, Lipstick Jihad is an interesting take on life after the Islamic Revolution, and if readers are aware of the revolution, this memoir offers a unique stance on the life of Iranians, breaking the stereotypical view of an oppressed crowd. Though the memoir's purpose is the author's confrontation with her feelings in diaspora, it is intertwined with the experiences of an upcoming generation of Iranians which both rebels against and serves the Islamic regime.
VII. Concluding Remarks

The diversity and intricacy of the tapestry of the Muslim diaspora, and of Muslims in the Muslim homelands, render almost impossible any attempt to generalize or categorize them as one identical group. Although untangling such a multifaceted construction is highly complicated, identifying some common threads that unify and unite them seems possible. One such factor is that Muslims in the diaspora are united as a cohesive resistance force against the West’s armed interventions in the Middle East. However divided Muslims be in other ways, there is at least this unifying political identification that draws them together.

The representation of Islam in Muslim diasporic writings is a polemical issue. Islam, in most of these writings, is represented through either oppressive Islamic regimes, as in Saudi Arabia or Iran, or through conservative communities living in the diaspora, as for example Muslims in the UK. In these writings, the search for self can be seen as a universal journey or a saga where the protagonists, feeling displaced and unable to connect, usually resort to their religious roots, to Islam, to find belonging and meaning. Whether in diaspora or in their homeland, their attempts fail, and they end up in more isolation and alienation, simply because their idealized Islam and imagined Muslim homeland do not exist.
Confronting such a pejorative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, Muslim critics seek to discredit the authenticity, accuracy and neutrality of those writers, and at times label them as ‘compradors’ who betray their roots and community. Some of these writers are, as in the examples in my thesis, are likely to have been educated in the secular, liberal western mentality. The critics’ concern is that such writings may feed into the neo-orientalist hegemonic discourse in pigeonholing and demonizing Muslims. The question that arises here is, given the concern that those critics have, whether they have the right to deny the writers’ right to voice their opinion and depict Islam based on their personal experience. Another question is where, if anywhere, we can find the ‘true’ Islam and Muslims in this world, so writers can refer to them in their writings? Is personalizing Islam always perceived as a precarious process that could lead to stereotyping, and therefore supporting the West’s hegemonic discourse against Muslims?

I would like to conclude by recounting an incident that occurred following the production of my play The Widow in Waterloo, Ontario. A well-known female Syrian director came to me and asked, “Why did you show them our shit?” By “them” she meant the Western audience, and by “our” she meant that which belongs to Muslims. She was not disputing the truth of my representation, only whether I was right to expose the subjugation and victimization of widows by
practices informed by patriarchal structures, traditional norms, and religious prejudice. Another Muslim critic noted that my play reinforces the stereotypical image of the Arab-Muslim man. Although I disagree with his observation, if a realistic and authentic representation, based on personal experience and a true story, is perceived as equivalent to the stereotype, then overlooking it is even worse. Whether or not I am reinscribing the stereotype, what matters most is that I am revealing the truth.
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