# Master Thesis Literature Today

## Reading Nafisi Reading Lolita: Re-Orientalism in 21st American Literature

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## Abstract

Although Edward Said's theorization of Orientalism has been widely applied to literary works over the last four decades, it should also be considered how it has been re-theorized and renewed as a result of more contemporary literature. In reaction to Said's term, scholar Lisa Lau has coined the concept of "Re-Orientalism," which means that diasporic authors are representing the people from the Orient in the West while they are Oriental themselves, though at the same time they are non-Oriental, or Occidental, because of their current residence. In this thesis, I apply Lau's theory of Re-Orientalism to one of the most successful diasporic memoirs in 21st century American literature: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I conclude that Nafisi's work has distorted the representation of the Other in the West and that it reinforces Western stereotypes.

Keywords: Orientalism, Re-Orientalism, Diaspora, Arab-American, Iranian-American, Middle East, Islam, Islamophobia.

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## Introduction

Edward Said articulated the concept of Orientalism in the second half of the 1970s as the process of making a distinction between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident” (Said 10). According to Said, Orientalist writers use the distinction between the East and the West as a starting point for any work they produce, looking at “the Other” from a Western perspective. As Said states, “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient (…) either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (Said 2).

Scholar Lisa Lau states that Orientalism is often seen as a negative cultural construct, describing it as a “European imperialistic strategy composing a positive image of the Western Self while casting the ‘East’ as its negative alter ego, alluring and exotic, dangerous and mysterious, always the Other” (Lau 1). Lau has introduced a new term that fits right in between Said’s two terms of Orientalism and Occidentalism: Re-Orientalism. She describes this term, in terms of literature, as Orientalism that is propagated by Orientalist writers, albeit diasporic Orientalist writers (Lau 571). By the term diasporic, it is meant that these writers have a history with “the Orient”, but are now writing about it from the West as if looking at it as “the Other.” Lau argues that the process of Re-Orientalism distorts the representation of the Orient and is “once again consigning the Oriental within the Orient to a position of ‘The Other’” (Lau 571).

A diasporic author has the ambiguous position of being both an outsider and an insider, writing about one’s homeland from the perspective of one’s new ‘home’ in the West. A diasporic author does not have to be born in the East; they can also be born in a Western country, but still has his or hers ethnic or cultural roots in the East. What’s so interesting about the concept of Re-Orientalism, is the fact that there is a certain hybridity in the identity

of diasporic authors, as they can be both identified as being from the Orient and the Occident. It raises the question to what extent these authors are Oriental or Occidental and how this complexity is situated in the interaction between the two.

In this thesis, I apply this concept of Re-Orientalism to Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I chose this particular book because it is one of the most successful diasporic memoirs of the 21st century and has therefore had a big influence on American readers. Azar Nafisi grew up in Iran and moved to the United States. Published in 2003, a year and a half after the events of 9/11, the memoir quickly gained a best-seller position and remained on the *New York Times Book Review* list for the rest of 2004. A year after publishing it was ranked second on the list of most-read books on college campuses, fifth most borrowed nonfiction book in US libraries, and translated into twelve languages (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 624). As Burwell confirms, "this rich literary work topped the New York Times bestseller list for more than ninety weeks, sold more than one million copies and received enthusiastic reviews from critics across the West" (Burwell 64).

While the book generated a tremendous response, a lot of which was positive, it also generated debate. Critics said that it was supposedly written for a Western audience, as it uses Western classic literary texts "to undermine Persian cultural autonomy" (Kraus). Four years after the first publication of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Lau published her article on Re-Orientalism, a concept that turns out to be particularly relevant to this discussion, as Nafisi has been criticized for fitting right into Western stereotypes of the Orient, instead of breaking these stereotypes. Though there are many sources that criticize Nafisi for having a Westernized outlook, very few, if any, scholars use Lau's research in terms of *Reading Lolita in Tehran.* A careful search through academic search engines such as JSTOR and Google Scholar did not reveal any articles applying Re-Orientalism to Nafisi's book. This is particularly striking since this term seems to be especially applicable to this memoir.

Correspondingly, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the ways in which Re-Orientalism offers us insight into the debate of Nafisi's book. My research question is formulated as follows: In what way can Re-Orientalism be found in 21st century diasporic American Literature, specifically in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*?

Other questions that are raised are how is Re-Orientalism defined in connection to contemporary American literature? How are Arab-Americans situated in the United States and how are they stereotyped? What is the response of critics of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*? Though I am aware that Azar Nafisi is an Iranian-American, which officially makes her a Persian-American, theory about the representation of Arab-Americans will be used because, as the second chapter of this thesis will make clear, in an American context, Persian-Americans are often classified into the group of Arab-Americans.

Arab-American literary texts often explore the notion of Arab-American identity and the complexities and social and political struggles that are linked to this notion. As Majaj states, "through narrative and poetic explorations of Arab-American identity and agency, writers not only claim space for an Arab-American identity in the wider social, cultural and political U.S. and diasporan context, they help to shape and articulate this identity" (Majaj 6). Through literature, Arab-American authors take back their own autonomy by articulating their own identity instead of having it articulated by others.

By exploring Arab-American identity, Arab-American literary texts often include stereotyping and Islamophobia after 9/11. Re-Orientalism can also especially be found in post 9/11 literature. The events on 9/11 reinforced the idea of Us versus Them and it strengthened the feeling of opposition between the Arabs and Muslims and the West. A lack of knowledge about the Other, about Arab-Americans, already existed. The terrorist attacks were a wake-up call and, as scholar Silke Schmidt states, they revealed many unanswered questions that already existed, such as "Who are these Arabs? What role do they play in the United States?

Are they all terrorists, as popular sentiment seems to suggest?" (14). After the events on September 11th 2001, America's position towards the East changed. A distrust of the Muslim "Other" emerged, and this Islamophobia is still present today.

The production of memoirs and autobiographies has been a long-standing tradition in literature. This is despite the fact that there is an assumption that autobiographies are fundamentally Western, since it focuses on the individual rather than a community, which is typical for Eastern civilizations (Schmidt 32). Arab autobiographies and memoirs aim to give a historical record of one's life to share it with others, a focus that marks the key difference with Western autobiographies (Schmidt 33). Majaj also states that literary texts help to shape public opinions: "Literary texts provide a framework for thinking about issues of cultural identity: they not only help us explore how individuals construct their relationship with the collective, including how the past is remembered and narrated and how the present and future are conceptualized; they also help to shape notions of this collective" (Majaj 7). Considering the fact that this is the kind of power literature could have, it is clear that literary texts can also be used for researching concepts such as Re-Orientalism.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* gives insight in the controversial concepts about hybrid identity and reflects the current society in an Arab-American context. The hybridity lies in the fact that Western thought and Eastern thought collide in the Arab-American identity. It may be argued by opponents that this literary text is too biased about America and Iran and the relationship between the two, as it is about one person's life and influences in both countries, and therefore may not provide a good reflection to research concepts such as Re-Orientalism. It is of course true that all literary texts, just like this memoir, is biased. In fact, it is impossible for it to be completely neutral. As scholar Catherine Burwell also states, "Memoirs, like all texts, reveal only the partial perspective of their author. Texts (both fictional and nonfictional) and our imaginative readings of them are partial due to the unique

situatednesses of both authors and readers, of which we are only partly conscious; texts and readings are also constructed intentionally by author biases and interests" (70). However, people can identify with literary texts and, as a result, literature can even shape their opinion as it seems to provide a sense of truth to its readers. As Burwell argues: "that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a memoir or autobiography lends the text even more legitimacy and promise to non-Muslim readers as a source of " truth" about women and Islam" (70). Scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj agrees: "Literary texts play a crucial role in communal identity formation, for they not only give voice to the experiences (real and imagined) of members of the community; they provide a framework within which notions of communal identity may be articulated and explored" (Majaj 6). Because of this sense of truth, this memoir does provides a good case study for this thesis.

Literature has been selected that concerns concepts that deal with "the Other," namely Orientalism and Re-Orientalism, and to a lesser extent Occidentalism, though the main focus will be on Re-Orientalism. Secondly, a framework will be provided of the way Arab-Americans are situated in the United States, as it is important to contextualize the diasporic authors' relationship with their home country, and in order to understand the complexity of the identity of being both Arab and American. Lastly, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* will be analyzed in terms of the criticism it has received by scholars regarding Re-Orientalism.

## Chapter 1 (Re-) Orientalism and "Other" concepts

The concept of Orientalism is still widely applied in many studies, among which in American literary studies. Said defines this concept as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1) and a way of thinking based on "the distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"" (Said 2), meaning that Orientalism makes a clear distinction between the West and the Orient, or the East, something Orientalists would present as a difference between 'Us' versus 'Them.' On the American experience regarding Orientalism, Said also stated that Americans associate the Orient "very differently with the Far East" (Said 1) but the "vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims on our understanding of that Orient" (Said 2). Said also mentions a third meaning of Orientalism, which is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). In other words, Said's concept of Orientalism describes the way in which the West dominates and undermines the Orient as "the Other."

Said's research in Orientalism revealed the implicit construction of an allegedly inferior Eastern civilization by Western writers, analyzing to what extent the West "established an image of the Orient as backward, barbaric, and inherently inferior" (Schmidt 21). As a result of this discourse, the Middle Easterners had been "othered" without being able to define themselves; they were unwillingly placed in opposition of the West. This concept of binary thinking is crucial in Orientalism (Schmidt 21).

The domains of literature and art are never separated from politics and power in Orientalism. In Said's view, "literature and popular culture contributed as much to the prevalence of Orientalist myths as did political figures and scholars" (Schmidt 21-22). Said elaborated on this view with his publication *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World.* This publication succeeded *Orientalism* in

1981 (Schmidt 22). Said's method of historical and literary analysis was applied here as well as in *Orientalism*. It showed in how far recurring stereotypes in Western media representations of Islam and the Middle East "have come to dominate the global view of Arabs" (Schmidt 22). Representations of the Middle East in Western media have been the primary contributors to the creation of stereotypes in the West.

Scholar James G. Carrier summarizes Said's criticism on Orientalism in two central points about the Orient as an image that is presented by Western academics (Carrier 195). He describes the first point Said makes of the image of the Orient as one that "stresses the Orient's radical separation from and opposition to the West," or, in other words, the strong feeling of Us versus Them, where the West, 'Us', is opposite from the Orient, or 'Them'. The second point "invests the Orient with a timeless essentialism" (Carrier 195), which means that to Orientalists, the Orient is an ageless, unchanged system. As Carrier explains, "the Orient is the manifestation and embodiment of an essence, an Orient-ness, that transcends the vagaries of time, place, and historical accident" (Carrier 196). Regardless of historical or political events or changes, in Orientalism the Orient stays the same in the eyes of the West.

Carrier makes clear that a major part of the process of Orientalism is self-definition by opposing oneself with the other: "Said also sees Orientalism as an instance of a fundamental process of self-definition by opposition with the alien" (Carrier 196). He explains that essentially, Orientalism is the process of the "juxtaposition of two opposed, essentialized entities, the West and (for lack of better terms) the Other or the Alien" (Carrier 196). Carrier tries to make clear that Orientalism is a process in which the identity of the Other exists because it opposes the identity of the West. In this way, Orientalism identifies anything that is not the West. Thus, in Orientalist terms, the Other is not only the East, but can be anything that is in any way opposed to the West. The West is in this case thus set as the standard

against which all Others are defined (Carrier 197). Even though Said famously pointed out this concept of Orientalism four decades ago, it still occurs in contemporary literature.

Opposite of Orientalism is Occidentalism, though this concept is not a frequent term in academic texts. The concept of Occidentalism is important to discuss however, as it is inextricably linked to Orientalism in the way that it is essentially self-definition through the juxtaposition or "dialectical opposition" between the two (Carrier 199). The West needed the Orient to define itself "as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Lau 1), meaning that the Occident needs the Orient to define itself with the gaze from the Other, and vice versa. The West needs the Other to compare it to itself and make sense of itself. As Carrier states about anthropological Occidentalism, "its essentializations of the West do not exist on their own. Instead, they are paired with essentializations of alien societies in a process that defines Us, Them, and the differences between the two" (Carrier 203).

Drawing on the concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism, scholar Lisa Lau discusses the concept of Re-Orientalism, which is not propagated by people from the West, as usual, but propagated by diasporic writers from the Orient who are settled in the West. After Said published *Orientalism* in 1978, there has been a tremendous influx of immigrants and refugees from all around the world into the United States. This meant that the culture of the East was now also in the West, so Eastern and Western cultures intertwined. Under these changed conditions where Easterners are also publishing their literary works in the West, Orientalism is not quite capturing the complexity of the interaction between the East and the West, which is where Re-Orientalism steps in.

Re-Orientalism is the process of diasporic writers who originate from the Orient but have accommodated their writing and their visions to fit into the Orientalized thought of the West. This in turn results in the negative process of reinforcing Western stereotypes and the claiming of authenticity and knowledge about an entire culture that is considered as Other by

Western readers. From the West, diasporic authors reflect upon the Orient both as a person from the Orient, as they were born there and spent many years there, but also as a person from the West, with Western eyes, as they are now settled in the West.

As a result of Re-Orientalism, these diasporic Orientals are distorting the representation of the Orient and looking at the Oriental within the Orient as ”the Other,” which also often happens with non-diasporic authors who originate from the West (Lau 571). In Re-Orientalism, Lau states, "'Orientals' are seen to be perpetrating Orientalisms no less than 'non-Orientals' and, moreover, perpetrating certain and selected types of Orientalisms" (1). Lau argues that Re-Orientalism is a development of the last few decades in which Orientalism is no longer the representation of the non-Orientals or the Occidentals, but that role has partly been taken over by people from the Orient, by diasporic authors (Lau 572).

While Lau's research is mainly focused on diasporic South Asian women writers, I argue that this concept of Re-Orientalism can also be applied to American literature written by American diasporic authors who originate from the Middle East, because in its essence, Re-Orientalism represents both the self and the other at the same time. As Lau formulates, "the positionality of the powerful is simultaneously that of the insider and the outsider" (Lau 572), which also applies to diasporic authors in the United States, just like diasporic authors in any other Western country.

While diasporic authors are mostly based in the Occident, Lau argues that Re-Orientalism is still not the same as Orientalism. The difference between Orientalism and Re-Orientalism lies in the fact that diasporic authors can also be identified as Orientals to some extent. "They are not completely alien to the Orient, but derive both ancestry and identity from the Orient" (Lau 572). Moreover, as Lau states, "Re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of Western readers, by playing (along) with them

or by discarding them altogether" (Lau 1). Thus, Said's concept of Orientalism is essential in Re-Orientalism, as diasporic authors may attempt to live up to the Orientalist expectations of Western readers. In a way, the power of Orientalist discourse is visible in the presence of this concept of Re-Orientalism (Lau 1).

Lau identifies three major characteristics of Re-Orientalism, the first being "the necessity of being recognizable within a culture (582). She explains that diasporic authors over-compensate by desperately trying to include certain recognizable characteristics of a culture, while these characteristics are mostly in the background in the work of home authors. Diasporic authors are more concerned with cultural characteristics to come across as more authentic.

The second characteristic Lau identifies, is the combination of generalizations and totalizations. Diasporic authors often make statements that appear to be more the norm than the exception. Lau argues that this negative Re-Orientalization has several explanations. One of the aims of generalizing and totalizing a culture, Lau argues, is the "cold commercial intent of exoticising in order to increase sales" (584-585). Another explanation could be that these writers may also have an unwritten agenda, having to constantly re-negotiate their identity, they aim to "claim insider knowledge (and status), while somehow distancing themselves enough to claim the position of knowledgeable representative or emissary" (585).

The third characteristic diasporic authors sometimes claim something to be the truth in a novel that blurs the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. "A 'truth claim' is the case of an author writing a tale that very closely resembles his or her own life-story, a tale which usually glorifies and justifies the actions of the protagonist, but a tale which is written under the guise of being fiction" (585). While the writing remains fiction, sometimes the plot corresponds extremely closely to the lives of the diasporic author. As a result, the author can claim a larger degree of authenticity through the closeness of personal experience (586).

There is often enough information to easily notice the close resemblance to the author's personal life. Thus, even though implicit, there is a truth claim, giving a distorted and disproportionate representation of a culture. Lau concludes that even though some diasporic writers actually knit the different elements of two opposing cultures onto a single, wider framework, the influences on and preoccupations of diasporic writing have too often resulted in insistently setting up the Orient and the Occident as binaries.

Re-Orientalism is strengthened by the fact that diasporic authors have a more visible, and therefore more dominant position in the West than home authors, which makes it easier for diasporic authors to provide a representation of the Orient, than authors who still live in the Orient. According to Lau, diasporic authors are in a position of power and dominance in the West, compared to the writers who are actually based in the Orient (572), as it is easier for Western readers to relate to a diasporic author than to an Oriental author. She also argues that it is mostly diasporic (women) writers that create and keep the global literary image of the orient, because diasporic authors simply have more output as a group than home authors (Lau 572-573). This dominant position of the diasporic authors, though often unintended, enables them to Re-Orientalize.

Diasporic writers are also more visible than home authors due to the fact that they have access to Western publishers because they live in metropolitan centers. Through these Western publishers, diasporic authors gain an international readership. They also have a considerably larger potential for publicity, something which their counterparts, the home authors, can only dream of.

That being said, home authors are not necessarily envious of the diasporic writers. They are rather "justifiably aggrieved" when diasporic writers' artistic integrity is compromised when they have become pawns of the publishing industry (Lau 573). This feeling of aggravation among the home writers towards the diasporic writers can be connected

to totalization. Lau mentions the term totalization as defined by Uma Narayan as "casting values or practices which pertain only to specific privileged groups within the community as values of the "culture" as a whole" (573). In other words, specific groups within a culture have specific values or practices, but in the process of totalization, these specific values or practices are represented as if they are part of the entire culture, one that consists of a number of groups. Thus, the work of diasporic writers that is written for a more international readership is often considered as a good representation of the culture of the Orient, while in reality they represent but a part of this culture. Lau states that totalization has always been present in literature, and speculates that Re-Orientalism is part of this totalization. Orientalism, as explained by Said, represents a relationship of unequal power relations, and this has not changed in Re-Orientalism. This is not necessarily the intention of the diasporic authors, but simply both their individual and collective positionality, which has triggered this process of Re-Orientalism that has now become "almost inevitable in the genre" (Lau 574).

Along with the dominant position of diasporic writers often comes the insecurity over self-identity of diasporic authors themselves. There is a certain hybridity of both their Western and Oriental cultures. As Rushdie formulates, they are "obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 76). The definition of self has a fragmented nature for diasporic authors. They are strangers everywhere, both in the East and the West. Diasporic authors behave like a chameleon, using both new and old experiences, looking back or referencing a distant place (Lau 581). Arab-Americans encounter this same struggle as diasporic authors, having a fragmented identity.

Because of this fragmented nature of the sense of self, diasporic authors struggle with the degree of authenticity that their diasporic literature has. Diasporic authors respond to this is different ways. Some seek to learn and ask local residents to check the accuracy of their manuscripts. Some regard this as no issue at all. Others claim authenticity, which results in

adverse effects “because these techniques seek less to negotiate and tease out the complications and nuances of identities” and rather depict a culture “oversimplistically, stereotypically, and often sensationally” (Lau 581). This last group of diasporic authors consists of those who target a readership that they suppose has little to no knowledge about the culture that they write about. Lau regards this as problematic, as it Re-Orientalizes the genre of literature from a particular country or area, and with it their culture. This way, they contribute to distortion and inaccuracy of a culture (Lau 581).

## Chapter 2 The Representation and Misrepresentation of Arab-Americans

In the process of Re-Orientalism, Western stereotypes, views and thoughts about Arab-Americans are reinforced in literature, which is why it is important to investigate what this Western thought is. While examining Re-Orientalism in an Iranian-American memoir, it is crucial to examine how this culture is represented in the United States. In this chapter, I aim to provide some contextualization on how the notion of the Middle Eastern American or Arab-American, the Arab-American identity, is situated within the United States.

Even though Iran is officially not a part of the Arab League and is in fact a Persian country, Iranian-Americans are often classified into the group of Arab-Americans, as broad generalizations often "collapse Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern cultures" (Burwell 67). Iranian-Americans are officially Persian-Americans, a term which is hardly used in scholarly articles. While it is a misconception that Iran belongs to the Arab world, the term Arab-American is still often used as an umbrella term frequently used in US academic institutions for Arabs, Muslims and Middle Easterners, regardless of true ethnic origin (Schmidt 17). Although Arabs are not always affiliated with Islam, literature that is produced by Muslims originating from non-Arab countries in the Middle East, such as Iran, is still considered 'Arab-American literature' (Schmidt 17).

In several scholarly articles that discuss Iranian literature, the notion of the Arab-Americans is also discussed in relation to all Middle Easterners and Iranian-Americans often encounter the same struggles as Arab-Americans in the United States. Arab-Americans even lobbied to be acknowledged as a specific ethnic classification and considered to be legally classified as Middle Eastern Americans: "an identification that would include not just Arabs but also Iranians, Turks, Armenians and others" (Majaj 88). Arab-American literary and cultural theory therefore helps to understand the position and representation of Iranian-

Americans. The focus will be more on Arab-Americans instead of Muslims, because in the United States, racial categories are more powerful than religious ones. As Schmidt confirms: "whereas Muslim refers to anyone who adheres to Islamic belief, Arab is a more general ethnic category that does not include religious affiliation" (Schmidt 16). While Islamic belief is of course also relevant, there is not enough space to go into depth about how that is situated in the United States as well.

Arabs and Muslims encounter a lot of misconceptions in America. Schmidt names three types of misconceptions that are common about Arab identity: First, Arabs are considered to be all people who live in Arab nations, regardless of their identification with their ethnic roots. Second, the entire Middle East is perceived as Arabic. The third misconception is that all Arabs are affiliated with Islam (Schmidt 16).

These misconceptions have been reinforced after 9/11. One of the major consequences following the events of 9/11 is the fact that the worldview of the majority of Americans changed. After the terrorist attacks, the majority of Americans became more and more aware of the Arab world. As author and literary scholar Gregory Orfalea stated, it was "the day on which Americans discovered the Arab world" (Orfalea 224). Arab-Americans were a previously forgotten minority, one that had gone mostly unnoticed by the public (Schmidt 14). After 9/11, Arab-Americans stood in the spotlight, in a negative way. The Bush administration opened the War on Terrorism and made political decisions based on fear and hatred, along with the media "intentionally labeling Arabs and Muslims as enemies" (Schmidt, 14). The public and political agenda was a binary rhetoric; the president initiated a feeling of "either with us or against us" and popular sentiment seemed to suggest that Arabs were all terrorists (Schmidt 14).

More than a century before the events on 9/11, Arabs were already living in the United States. Arab immigration to the New World started around the end of the 19th century. In the

1870s, the first wave of immigrants came to the US, mostly for jobs and better living conditions. They came to the United States with the intention of helping their families in "the old country" and eventually moving back to their home country, which was a development that lasted until the 1930s (Schmidt 17). The second wave of immigrants lasted until the start of World War I and, in contrast to the first wave of immigrants, these came with the intention of starting a new life and find a permanent residence in the United States. Due to their different intentions, where the first wave clung to their own cultural identity, the second wave changed their cultural attitude and adapted to American cultural identity. After World War II, Arab-Americans had adapted to American culture to such an extent that they could not be distinguished from others in American society (Schmidt 17). Coherence could also be found with respect to religion. Halfway into the 20th century, over 90 percent of Arabs were practicing the Christian belief (Schmidt 17). The third wave of immigrants, spanning from after World War II up to the present, changed this homogeneity, in the sense that it has a more "decisive degree of diversity" (Schmidt 18). Opposite from the first wave in the 1870s, Arab-American immigrants from the post-World War II era have been "eager to rediscover and retain Arab culture and language by rejecting the "melting pot approach"" (Schmidt 18).

There are no exact figures on how big the current Arab-American population is in the United States. The number of Arab-American citizens has estimates from 3 to 3.5 million (Schmidt 18). Even though Arab-Americans have a relatively higher educational level than average Americans, they remain historically and socially invisible in the US landscape (Schmidt 18). Arabs have never officially been part of American history, which is why "learning about Arabs and Muslims *from* the respective 'other' therefore hardly takes place" (Schmidt 19). Contrary to what many believe, according to Schmidt, the problem of invisibility and hostility towards Arab-Americans did not start on 9/11, but reaches back to stereotyping the Arab identity in the context of Orientalism throughout a century old history

(20). As a result, Arab-Americans felt the need to explore and define their own identity.

This notion of exploring the Arab-American identity manifests in Arab-American literature. It often captures the tension between self-representation versus how they are represented by others, for example in the media. According to scholar Lisa Suhair Majaj, there is a trajectory from homelessness to belonging in Arab-American literature. By homelessness Majaj means that, in this sense, the Arab-Americans does not have an idea of a home in the self: "a space shaped by cultural, political, social, religious, familial, gendered and geographical factors, but which cannot be reduced to any of these" (Majaj 209). Majaj argues that this trajectory in Arab-American literature reflects the attempts of the younger generations "to make sense of and claim all sides of their complex heritages while simultaneously constructing new ground on which to stand" (Majaj 208).

This curve of going from not having a sense of home to feeling like one belongs is of utter importance for an understanding of Arab-American literature and culture. "Within this trajectory, home-space, configured in both literal and metaphorical terms, takes on central importance, both as the domestic site of origin within which the drama of ethnicity is played out, and the desired end goad of belonging: the realm within which the ethnic self is constituted and the place where the fragmented self can become, finally, whole" (Majaj 208). Majaj explains that there is no linear route from immigrant to Arab-Americans: there is an uneven racialization of Arabs in the United States, on top of the complexity of gendered ethnicity and portrayals of Arab womanhood in America. For Arab women in America it is even harder to define their own identity, as there are many stereotypes focused on Arab women in particular, which will be discussed further later on. Due to different racializations and ideas about ethnic identity for female and male Arab-Americans, they are forced "to continually grapple with the ways in which the categories of "Arab" and "American" impinge

on each other and reshape each other," a process which has been emphasized after 9/11 (Majaj 4).

Stereotyping of the Arab identity has increased considerably due to media representation. Jack Shaheen's book *Reel Bad Arabs,* which was later adapted into a documentary, discusses the problem of the vilification of the Arab-American character in American television. Shaheen also wrote an article in which he addresses the repeated stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs as terrorists in television, stating that there is no diversity in Arab-American portrayals on TV (Shaheen 10). Author Moustafa Bayoumi also addresses this problem in his book *How Does it Feel to Be a Problem?* in which he gives a voice to a group of Arab-Americans "who since 2001 have had to navigate a rocky terrain somewhere between expectation and frustration" (6).

Moreover, an article on the website of Arab-American News discusses stereotypical representation of Arab-Americans and Middle Easterners. Even though there have been some recent positive changes, such as Rami Malek being the first-ever Arab-American Best Actor award winner this year, "Arabs are still being predominantly cast as villains at worst and token, inauthentic characters at best" (Meyer). This same article mentions a 2018 study, which showed that 78 percent of all Middle Eastern and North African actors "were cast in villainous roles, such as terrorists or tyrants, as of the 2015-2016 television season" (Meyer).

An example of Middle Eastern or Arab media representation is a Coca Cola commercial for the Super Bowl in 2013. In this ad, an Arab person is depicted walking through the desert with his camel as he encounters a person on a motorcycle, a group of cowboys and a group of showgirls on a bus. They are all chasing a giant bottle of coke. The ad refers to the Coca Cola website, to vote for who will win this chase, though it does not feature the option to vote for the Arab character. Warren David, president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, also rightfully wondered "Why is it that Arabs are

always shown as either oil-rich sheiks, terrorists, or belly dancers?" (Zeidler). This ad sparked controversy among Arab-Americans (Zeidler).

Another example is the 1992 Disney film Aladdin, which sparked controversy among Arab-American groups as they claimed it portrayed Arabs as being barbaric. "In the first minute, for example, the theme song declared that Aladdin hailed "from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam, where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home"" (Nittle). A third example is the 1994 blockbuster "True Lies" in which there is a group of Arab terrorists called the Crimson Jihad, "whose members, Arab-Americans complained, were portrayed as one dimensionally sinister and anti-American" (Nittle).

These examples all add to the stereotyping of Arab-Americans and fit into the framework of Arab-American media representation. Said discussed 'frames,' a concept which eventually became known as framing theory in media research, describing stereotypical media representations of Arabs as "organizational frameworks," which exceed the factual content and evokes particular interpretations for Western audiences (Schmidt 23). Said argued in an interview that the process of framing is never neutral, as it represents choice, selectivity, exclusions and inclusions (Schmidt 23). Framing explains how media reporting shapes the audience's opinion (Schmidt 24) and how the media maintains a stereotype of Arabs. Schmidt discusses the assumption about Arabs perpetuated by television according to Jack Shaheen's research. "His investigation started out with the assumption that "[t]elevision tends to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs: they are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism"" (Schmidt 25)

After being mostly invisible for many years, Arabs gained a new media image after the events of 9/11. According to several studies, there is sufficient evidence that the War on

Terrorism has dominated the coverage of Arabs in American media and has become a "major frame of interpretation and source of stereotypical images of Arabs" (Schmidt 27). The concept of "race" has become increasingly significant to Arab-Americans in the past decades, as they feel as if they do not quite fit in with any other racial group. As Lisa Suhair Majaj explains, while this particular ethnic group is excluded from minorities of color, it also does not fit in with white ethnic groups. "Although classified as "white" by current government definitions, they are conspicuously absent from discussions of white ethnicity, and are popularly perceived as non-white" (Majaj 75). The fact that they do not fit into white or colored racial groups makes it harder for Arab-Americans to determine their identity.

Additionally, the combination of being an Arab-American and being a woman makes it even harder to define one's Arab-American identity in today's American culture. There are several stereotypes about Arab-American women that are perpetuated by the media. Hollywood has mostly presented Middle Eastern women as either scarcely dressed belly dancers or oppressed women in veils. Arab-American scholar Mohja Kahf identified three stereotypes of Arab women, which all have to do with gender oppression: "the victim of gender oppression", "the escapee of an oppressive culture" and "the pawn of Arab male power" (Burwell 80). As Majaj also argues, conceptions of a home are often a gendered space, which has often been the subject of feminist criticism (Majaj 209).

The concept of home as a "gender-coded construct" (209) is often present in the context of immigrant literature. Majaj states that this is the result of nostalgia: "the metonymic and thematic slippage between home and the ethnic homeland often means that nostalgia for an ethnic past becomes conflated with nostalgia for tradition and for traditional structures such as patriarchy" which results in home-space as a "reification of patriarchy" (209). In this construct, Arab-American women become an example of how the ethnic community must change in order to find home-space in America, in order to 'belong' (Majaj

209) and there is a constant struggle between trying to fit into American society and staying true to one's ethnic roots.

This struggle makes it hard for Arab-American women to be both feminist and ethnic, as they seek to break these constructs at the intersection of "sexism within our communities and racism in U.S. society" (Majaj 210). Majaj argues that "this linkage creates a slippage between ethnicity and patriarchy, Americanization and feminist liberation that poses troubling problems for women who identify as both feminists and ethnics; who seek, that is, to articulate identity without eliding any aspect of their selfhood" (Majaj 209).

Feminism and women's movements are not new in Iran; feminists have long demanded equality and justice within this religiously fundamentalist state, though feminist history is often divided into pre- and post-revolutionary terms. Before the Iranian Revolution, feminist rights were determined by the Western-minded elite. "The emphasis was on individual rights in terms of clothing (abandoning the veil) and equal access to education and employment within a secular state and Western framework" (Donadey 624). After the revolution, these questions of feminism were determined in an Islamic framework that coincided with the Quran, resulting in some Iranian feminists continuing to fight for women's rights, but now using the strategy of referencing the Islam and the Quran to claim their rights (624).

Still, Arab-American feminists seem to only be taken seriously when they have been Americanized and have been 'freed' from their home culture, as Majaj states, "Arab-American women who speak or act as feminists may be presumed able to speak out *only* because they have "escaped" their home culture or have "evolved" through contact with Americanization to a "higher" level" (Majaj 210). This assumption among American feminists is the result of an opposition between American identity and Arab identity that creates a struggle for Arab-Americans, as they experience the need to choose between their

traditional home culture and American culture. The Arab is often represented as inherently different from Americans, in the sense that Arabs are represented as not free, while freedom is such an essential part to American identity (Majaj 211). In Arab culture, connective selfhood is seen as positive, while Western discourses stress individual selfhood (Majaj 211). So, in this sense, as Majaj argues, "the more traditionally Arab a woman is, the more oppressed and repressed she is assumed to be; the more sexually or sartorially liberated, the more American" (Majaj 211). This opposition suggests that if Arab-Americans seek freedom or transformation, they must "move away from Arab identity and toward American identity" which forces Arab-American women, who also claim a feminist identity, to reject one or another part of their identities (Majaj 211).

Studies show that the generally negative representation of Arabs in the media not only helps to shape the public opinion, but also has an impact on the identity and self-definition of Arab-Americans themselves (Schmidt 29). As a result, Arab-American writers in the post-9/11 era have actively tried to define themselves through literary expression, as a means to go against the definition of themselves by others (Schmidt 30). A few examples are Mohja Kahf's first novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf,* published in 2006, in which Kahf explores Islam as primary theme, which had hardly been done before (Salaita 32) and Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* and *Once in a Promised Land,* both in which she focuses on Arab-American identity and the effects of 9/11, among other themes (Salaita 42). Contemporary Arab-American fiction writing engages with political conflict in the Arab World. This engagement served as a major motivation for Arab-American authors to face the question "write or be written" (Schmidt 31).

Still, a specific definition of Arab-American literature remains challenged. Arab-American literature often assumes a "tone of ethnic celebration coexisting with assertion of Americanness" (Majaj 4). There is a great variety in genre in Arab-American writing.

According to Majaj, Arab-American authors often raise personal questions about gender constructs and gendered experiences (212). They depict Arab-American home spaces transfiguratively: “spaces to be claimed and refigured, rather than escaped,” while also focusing on problematic gender issues, rather than defensively denying or ignoring them (213). They explore the apparent opposition between gender and ethnicity that continues to represent Arab-American feminists as “metaphorically homeless” (Majaj 213).

Arab-American literature has established itself as an American literature through the years, and has claimed this status “without the apologetics and self-consciousness of earlier decades” (Majaj 5). While it is categorized as diaspora writing by some, others regard Arab-American literature as a “unique defining feature” that distinguishes itself from other ethnic literature (Schmidt 32). For Arab-American authors, their literary texts are located on a landscape “upon which US identification, both civic and cultural, coexists with a struggle against a deeply embedded anti-Arab racism and negative stereotyping” (Majaj 5). These Arab-American authors are deeply affected by political issues in the Arab world, and this shows through an “ongoing diasporan consciousness” where the texts of these authors often draw a connection to politics and “multiple unsettlings of the boundaries of identity” (Majaj 6). In most Arab-American writing, questions are raised “which are central to the construction of Arab-American identity on both a personal and communal level: questions about how domestic spaced and gender roles limit or enable women’s agency, and about where and what home is in a bifurcated, politically fraught and increasingly transnational context.” (Majaj 212).

Azar Nafisi’s memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* fits into this context of stereotyping, fitting into the existing stereotypical representation of Arabs in the West. Nafisi speaks out very negatively about the revolution in Iran and depicts America the place where the women in her book club can be free, as opposed to Iran. She portrays wearing the veil as oppressive

and displays a one-sided view about the political developments in Iran, which matches Western thought.

## Chapter 3 Re-Orientalism in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Azar Nafisi wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran* about her life from being a professor at two Iranian universities to the secret book club after her resignation, to her life after her move to the United States. The memoir is divided into four sections, each section is linked to the Western literary text that the club was reading at that time: Lolita, Gatsby, James and Austen. The first two parts are named after the title, while the last two chapters are named after the author's last name. Nafisi connects the texts to the lives of the characters, the first two parts being mostly connected to *Lolita* and *The Great Gatsby*, while the last two parts are mostly connected to several texts by James and Austen. For example, while the group discusses Henry James' *Daisy Miller,* Mitra "confessed that she envied Daisy's courage" (Nafisi 200). A few paragraphs later, while describing her friend Mina to her magician, Nafisi uses a quote from James' *The Ambassadors*, "I'm a perfectly equipped failure" (201). The women connect the works to the political situation around the Iranian revolution, and the literary texts can also be applied on a more personal level to the lives of these women at that particular time.

Azar Nafisi grew up in Iran, but was educated in Europe and the United States between the ages of 13 and 30. When most elite Iranians were fleeing the country because of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Nafisi moved back to Iran to teach, while being very aware of the dangerous political situation in the country (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 628). She worked as a professor in Western Literature at the University of Tehran and the Allameh Tabataba'i university, and left Iran again to move with her family to America in 1997, where she now works at John Hopkins University and lives in Washington, D.C.

In her book, Nafisi approaches Iran from a transnational perspective, as she finds herself "more and more alienated by the myriad ways in which the totalitarian theocracy regulated the daily lives of women and suppressed defiance" (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh

628). After the success of her memoir, several memoirs have been written by other Iranian diasporic female authors. According to scholar Seyed Mohammed Marandi, this was partially a result of the publishing of Nafisi's memoir, stating that it " led to the emergence of a whole genre of (…) memoirs, many of which are by Iranian women living in the United States or other Western countries" (Marandi 181). "*Reading Lolita in Tehran* also coincided with a growth in published personal memoirs, which have become wildly popular in recent years" (DePaul 74). These memoirs by Iranian women are increasingly popular in the West (Burwell 63). A few examples of popular Iranian-American memoirs are Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing with an accent*, and *Prisoner of Tehran: The end of childhood in Iran* by Marina Nemat.

Nafisi's memoir received varied criticism. For example, scholar Hamid Dabashi argued in Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* partially shaped the U.S. public opinion against Iran (Dabashi). Gideon Lewis-Kraus agrees with Dabashi, though he is more nuanced in his opinion stating that, even though Dabashi's skepticism is not entirely off the mark, the book's failure is not political as Dabashi suggests, but rather literary (Kraus). He argues that the problems with the book are "its inadvertent mildness and its smug satisfaction," mentioning Nafisi's self-importance and lack of emotional capacity to "rise above her own experience of life in the Islamic republic as a great inconvenience" (Kraus).

Others are positive of the novel, such as scholar Amy DePaul, who argued that Nafisi demonstrates the unique ways that literature speaks to its readers in their particular circumstances. DePaul conveys the idea that the setting in which a book is read helps to determine its meaning (DePaul 75). This concept of the setting in which a book is read, for example the idea that reading a work in the setting of Western culture contributes to a book's meaning is especially important for this particular book in two ways. The setting in which it is read determines how the portrayal of the complex relationship between the West and the

Other is understood. Moreover, the reader looks at America through the gaze of the other, looking at it both ideologically and critically from their political and historical context, thus, from their setting in Tehran. "The setting in which Nafisi operates in her story, as a professor of English-language literature during a revolution in opposition to secular Western values, exerts tremendous influence of the books she reads with her class" (DePaul 75).

Despite DePaul's positive review of the book, many scholars remain critical of Nafisi's work. While there have been many polarized discussions about Nafisi, there appear to be a few issues that have do with the way in which her memoir connects to Western thought, Western stereotypes about the East and Arab-American identity. Nafisi seems unable to look beyond herself at the situation in Iran from a larger perspective, which results in a distorted representation of Iran, though it is still accurate of her personal experience. These complexities become apparent when the following critical responses are considered, particularly focusing on stereotypes, certain passages and opinions in the book that can be connected to Re-Orientalism I will discuss three critical essays in depth about *Reading Lolita*, written by scholars on this topic, which is representative of the general critique that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has received.

## 3.1 Criticism by Seyed Mohammed Marandi

Scholar Seyed Mohammed Marandi accused Nafisi of having a Westernized outlook, which confirms Orientalist representations and, though Marandi does not explicitly mention the term, his criticism fits right into Re-Orientalism. Marandi calls Nafisi an "Orientalized Oriental," someone who "may reside in either the 'East' or 'West', but spiritually finds its sustenance in the West" (180). According to Marandi, Azar Nafisi "confirms what orientalist representations have regularly claimed, the backwardness and inferiority of Muslims and Islam" (180). Marandi states that Nafisi does this by displaying "an extraordinary amount of contempt towards anything that has to do with Islam" (180). While Nafisi does display some

Re-Orientalist thought, Marandi's criticism should be more nuanced. Nafisi does show contempt in her work, but not necessarily to Islam. It is said that Nafisi operates "from an entirely secular perspective" (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 628).

Nafisi's contempt seems to be aimed at the hostile political situation of that time. When talking about the giant posters of the ayatollah in the airport of Tehran, Nafisi's disdain shines through:

> "The walls of the airport have dissolved into an alien spectacle, with giant posters of an ayatollah staring down reproachfully. Their mood is echoed in the black and bloodred slogans: Death to America! Down with imperialism & Zionism! America is our number-one enemy! (…) I was home, but the mood in the airport was not welcoming. It was somber and slightly menacing, like the unsmiling portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and his anointed successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, that covered the walls" (Nafisi 81-82).

It becomes clear throughout the memoir that Nafisi does not support the political developments that are happening at that time. That being said, as scholars Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh argue, Nafisi does not acknowledge several important and influential attempts by Iranian feminists to claim women's rights, even though it cannot be possible that an elite, educated woman such as Azar Nafisi was unaware of this political development in the timeframe she describes. Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh mention the most active Iranian feminists Shirin Ebadi, Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji, stating that "these women are nationally recognized and are also influential figures in the Iranian diaspora in the west" (629). It is curious to say the least that Nafisi would be silent about this feminist activism throughout her work. Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh argue that "while these attempts at change

may seem marginal given the transformation of society the revolution brought about, a lack of acknowledgement of such efforts feeds into Western stereotypes of Iranian women as passive and helpless. It further reinforces the west's rhetoric that such oppression of women and backwardness are rooted in Islam" (629). Nafisi's silence about activism, which reinforces Western stereotypes, can also be considered contempt towards the Islamic state.

Marandi, who is an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Tehran and Head of Department of North American Studies, connects this display of contempt to Nafisi's wealthy family's link to the American-backed Shah of Iran, referring to her calling the Shah's last prime minister "a very 'democratic and farsighted' person (Nafisi 102)" even though thousands of people taking part in demonstrations in support of Ayatollah Khomeini, who lead the revolution that resulted in the overthrow of the Shah, were killed on the streets (180).

Moreover, Marandi states that Nafisi's education in Europe and the United States might have created a bias in Nafisi's work: "Nafisi sees salvation for Iranians as possible through English literature, Western thought and values, a Western education, and even views a green card as 'a status symbol' (285)" (180). To substantiate this argument, Marandi talks about Nafisi speaking of her "sophisticated French-educated friend Leyly (265)" when she tries to reason with her.

It must be pointed out here however that this has been taken a bit out of context, and does not come across as biased in the book as it seems in Marandi's text. Nafisi is actually talking about the uniqueness of Persian dancers. She describes a unique look on the face of Persian dancers, a look which she "cannot find a Western equivalent to compare it to (265)" but finds in the face of her French-educated friend as she dances.

Marandi also cites Nafisi's claim from which it could be concluded that Iranians are essentially different from Americans, which he describes as an orientalist claim that has been

made for centuries: “We in ancient countries have our past – we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgia about the promise of the future (109)” (181). This is also taken out of context, because Nafisi nuances this by applying it to Iran and is actually rather positive about it: “I told them that although the novel was specifically about Gatsby and the American dream, its author wanted it to transcend its own time and place.” She continues to tell her students about the subject of the American dream that both Mike Gold and F. Scott Fitzgerald had written about: “What Gold had only dreamed of had been realized in this faraway country, now with an alien name, the Islamic Republic of Iran” (109).

Additionally, Marandi claims that Yassi’s uncle, who lives in the United States, has a positive influence on Yassi because of his residence in the States. “His exceptional personality and moral influence is clearly linked to the fact that he lives in the United States. The superior Westernized male benevolently puts ‘ideas into Yassi’s head’ (270)” (181). However, shortly before this passage, on the same page, Nafisi describes why this uncle has such a strong bond with his niece, and he does not clearly show that it is because of his residence in the West. It seems to be more about his attention for Yassi and his show of interest in her as a person: “He was Yassi’s favorite. He listened to her poetry, looked over her sister Mina’s paintings, commented on their shy mother’s stories. He was patient, attentive, encouraging, and at the same time a bit critical, pointing out this little flaw, that weakness” (Nafisi 270). Marandi makes it seem as if this uncle is only encouraging her to come to America, but he also encouraged her musical practices and her studies at the University of Tehran.

Marandi does make some valid arguments, discussing the fact that, according to him, Nafisi has been well rewarded for her work “because of the way it sits comfortably with contemporary anti-Iranian politics in the United States and the ‘West’ in general” (181) and “her work operates within the dominant discursive practices in the West concerning Islam and

Iran" (184). In one passage from the book, Nafisi talks about her friend Laleh who has been expelled for not wearing a veil, from the Iranian university where she worked, after her return from teaching in Germany a few years earlier. "She had not worn a head scarf, of course. Of course! The guard had called out to her from inside his cage. As I imagine it now, the guard's post is literally a cage, a large protrusion of bars (Nafisi 161)." This connects seamlessly to anti-Islam thinking. Nafisi states it as obvious that Laleh would not wear a head scarf after she has been to the West, as if going to the West has 'opened her eyes,' implying that the head scarf itself is oppressive. She also depicts the guard as a flat, mean character, his post being a cage as the symbol of oppression. A little further she says: "I could pick up the phone and call Laleh, who two years ago finally moved to the US and now lives in Los Angeles" (Nafisi 161). The use of the word 'finally' could be seen as suggesting that life is better in the West and the only salvation for her is moving to the West.

This could definitely be read as an example of Re-Orientalism, or "Iranian native orientalist discourse," as Marandi calls it, saying that "it seems that people such as Nafisi are so sure of the uncritical reception of anything opposing the Islamic Revolution and Islam in general or, indeed, simply Iran, that they do not deem it necessary to give the least touch of credibility to their claims." (184). The reason for this, Marandi argues, is the fact that most Western critics would not question anti-Islam claims, as they "reinforce the dominant representations of Iran in America by constructing an exotic Iran principally derived from US archives" (184). The fact that she is a diasporic author, and thus has her ethnic or cultural roots in the country that she writes about, makes her statements all the more powerful. As Marandi argues, "she is an Oriental woman who has been enlightened by Western thought and culture, thus she is an authority on the backward and barbaric land that she has left behind" (184). Nafisi enforces this herself, speaking on behalf of all Iranians, saying that

'we' "living in the Islamic Republic of Iran grasped both the tragedy and absurdity of the cruelty to which we were subjected (23)" (Marandi, 185).

He also claims that many memoirs written by Iranian diasporic authors, including *Reading Lolita*, bring up the whole orientalist trope of the veil, which is now being perpetuated by 'native' women" (181). Marandi has a valid argument pointing out that Nafisi's bias in favor of the West comes through by the mere fact that she "attempts to 'liberate' the minds of young Iranians" by discussing English nineteenth-century literature, while ignoring the fact that it is "profoundly tied to colonialism" (181).

Another interesting point Marandi makes, is the fact that Nafisi quotes numerous important political figures, such as Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, while these quotes are not validated. "This is a rather curious point for someone like Nafisi, self-proclaimed intellectual (Nafisi 115) who sees herself as 'too much of an academic' (Nafisi 266)" (Marandi 184). He also refers to the passage in Nafisi's book where she points out that she "does not have a very precise memory" (Nafisi 161).

Considering the fact that this memoir, including the quotes, seem to be "relying on almost total recall" (Marandi 184), it makes Nafisi's work less reliable. This is not to say that the memoir should have been completely objective; memoirs can never be completely objective, and it can be easily argued that any objective form of representation does not even exist (188). However, it can be argued that Nafisi's representation of Iran is strikingly one-sided.

## 3.2 Criticism by Catherine Burwell, Hilary E. Davis and Lisa K. Taylor

Scholars Catherine Burwell, Hilary E. Davis and Lisa K. Taylor are also critical of Nafisi's work, placing it within Islamophobic discourses (64), which could also fit into Re-Orientalism. "In a world in which Muslim women are increasingly the subject of neo-Orientalist pity, fear and fascination, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* can hardly be read as a neutral

text" (Burwell 64). Burwell discusses a "Manichean view of the world" (66) where the Islam is considered to be the longstanding opponent to the West and its "values of democracy and individual liberty" (66). She also states that the events of 9/11 can be explained by the "ideological difference between the Islam and the West, between tradition and modernity" calling this opposition the "clash of civilizations" (66). This clash of civilizations is not limited to the United States. Burwell argues that the wide circulation of the clash of civilizations greatly affects the Western view concerning works from or about the Middle East and reinforces stereotypes (66).

She also argues that this approach of the clash of civilizations results in single texts being perceived as "representing 'the truth' about large and diverse populations" (66). After reading a work from one single Iranian woman such as Azar Nafisi, readers think they immediately know enough about Middle Eastern women and their history of oppression. Burwell argues that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is being read and taught in one of two approaches: via "empathetic identification" and "as a transparent lens which reveals the "truth" of post-revolutionary Iran and Muslim women" (68).

Burwell calls these approaches to the text both politically and philosophically problematic. She states that through empathetic identification, the reader assumes "that the text offers a truth about the world which is complete and objective rather than partial and constructed, and thus fools readers into thinking they can "know" the Other and the world/culture/nation from which they write" (68). The North American reader does not keep in mind that this is only just one memoir that is obviously biased, as are all memoirs, but through empathetic identification, the reader assumes similarities with themselves and as a result reads the memoir as if it presents the truth. Burwell suggests that the North American readers approach Nafisi's text from within dominant discourses, "reading for oppressed

and/or resisting heroines with whom to empathize" and look for a revelation of truth about this foreign world (Burwell 69).

Azar Nafisi herself supports this notion of empathetic identification in the book, saying, "the most courageous characters here are those with imagination, those who, through their imaginative faculty, can empathize with others. When you lack this kind of courage, you remain ignorant of others' feelings and needs" (249). She also says: "This, I believe, is how the villain in modern fiction is born: a creature without compassion, without empathy (…) Lack of empathy was to my mind the central sin of the regime, from which all the others flowed" (224).

Burwell argues that empathetic identification is "inherently egocentric," as it is more of a reassurance of the reader's moral position, rather than it leading to an estrangement of self (69). Burwell therefore calls it "unethical" (70): "we may think that when we empathize we see and feel through the eyes of another, but in fact what we are doing is reducing their Otherness to what is familiar and "known" about ourselves" (69). This is not to say that the reader thinks they are the character in the text, but rather they identify with the familiar characteristics of the character while still noticing key differences. As a result, the reader is under the false impression that they know and understand the Other "and behind this, that we truly know ourselves" (Burwell 70).

Empathetic identification in literature is not new: it is often used to teach readers about experiences of the Other. Burwell states that "these modes of reading," such as empathetic identification, in the literary memoir "inform and reinforce one another" (70). Also in the teacher's guide for *Reading Lolita*, the reader is encouraged to draw parallels between the lives of the characters and their own lives (Burwell 70). Burwell argues that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is often used as a resource for understanding culture and cultural differences. Instead of emphasizing the fact that this text is biased, and by no means reflects an entire culture, but

simply reflects one perspective on this culture, *Reading Lolita* is used as if it is the way to look at this culture neutrally, even if it is from the partial position of the reader: “Here empathizing, or seeing and feeling through another’s eyes, is an imaginative faculty which is grounded on the assumption that literature is transparent – a window onto another culture – masking both the constructed nature of the text and the partial perspective of the reader” (Burwell 70).

Because of the fact that *Reading Lolita* is a literary memoir, it is even more often assumed that the author’s story is authentic. Moreover, because of the author’s diasporic background and the fact that the author is therefore seen as Other to Western readers, it is often believed that they have a “ more legitimate claim at revealing this truth” and they have an “insider’s knowledge” (Burwell 70), while in reality it is ignored that this is only one perspective, and a very partial one at that.

Keeping in mind this common assumption when reading a memoir that it is a reflection of an entire culture, a common misreading of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by North American feminist readers is the fact that they empathetically relate to the rebellion of Azar Nafisi and her students. For example, Azar Nafisi’s friend Laleh refuses to wear a veil while going into the university, regardless of the new rule that says she must. She is chased by a guard and later she is fired. “An hour later Laleh had emerged from the door of the department, walked back to the entrance gate and, without so much as glancing at the guard, had marched out, a free woman. A free woman? Yes, I was given a choice, to immediately comply with the rules or be sacked. I chose not to comply, so now I am a free woman” (Nafisi 163). This passage suggests that wearing a veil means that a woman is in fact not free, a notion that is very appealing for North American feminists to identify with. Only by rebelling against this rule and refusing to wear a veil, which is seen here as undermining women’s freedom, Laleh can be a free woman.

Freedom is one of the main goals in feminism, as scholar Lynn S. Chancer states: "across feminism(s), freedom in the private and intimate realms of our lives is widely accepted as a major goal, and its impediment roundly criticized" (Chancer 13). As Burwell also states, these acts of rebellion "appeal to Western feminist sentiments which emphasize individual autonomy, rights and freedom rather than collective action, as well as shared assumptions about gender, drawing from the discourse of "global sisterhood" which overlooks differences of class, race and imperial power" (71). Burwell argues that the text only re-emphasizes what is known about Iranian women, and therefore only maintaining Western stereotypes of Arab women, stating that it "overlooks the rich and diverse history of women's activism in Iran" (71). However, these feminists therefore also automatically assume that their life in North America is better and thus also overlook the shortcomings of American culture and women's situation in the Unites States. Take for example the recent attack on abortion rights and the sexual abuse that a lot of American women face, which recently gained a lot of media attention due to the #MeToo movement, not to mention the unequal amount of women in positions of power compared to men, or the gender wage gap. Overlooking these shortcomings of women rights in North America creates "a false position of moral superiority" (Burwell 71). Because of the fact that Western readers are easily able to identify with the memoir, and it connects to their Western opinions about freedom and feminism, it can be argued that Nafisi's memoir is Re-Orientalized in this way.

### 3.3 Criticism by Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh

Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh concur that *Reading Lolita*'s value lies in the reader's empathetic identification with the work, stating that it has the "ability to elicit the reader's empathy for the characters" (Donadey 624). Just like Marandi and Burwell, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh emphasize that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* easily fits into American ideology, saying that it "can easily lend itself to interpretations that reinforce a dominant

Western, especially U.S., ideology" (624). It is reiterated that this is the text's greatest weakness, "written exclusively in terms of an Iranian context, yet written for a U.S. audience that is not provided with the historical and political tools to understand the text other than in Western terms" (624). They state that because of the lack of criticism towards Western imperialism, the text easily lends itself to be "co-opted by a dominant U.S. ideology" (642).

Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh argue that the literary value of the memoir is also an important aspect of the work's appeal, especially to a Western academic audience. It references to several nineteenth-century and twentieth-century novels written by American and English authors that replicate Nafisi's class lectures, and at the same time also apply to the story. Nafisi uses this intertextuality as a literary technique, among others, to interest her readers. For example, Nafisi uses Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* to advise her student Yassi about her desire to go to America and break free from the men in her life that controlled her life. She uses *Lolita* as a metaphor for Yassi, but also for the political situation in Iran. She tells Yassi: "the desperate truth of *Lolita*'s story is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual's life by another*" (Nafisi 33). She applies this to Yassi's life and to Iran: "I added that in fact Nabokov had taken revenge against our own solipsizers; he had taken revenge on the Ayatollah Khomeini, on Yassi's last suitor, on the dough-faced teacher for that matter. They had tried to shape others according to their own dreams and desires, but Nabokov, through his portrayal of Humbert, had exposed all solipsists who take over other people's lives" (Nafisi 33). Other literary techniques that add to *Reading Lolita*'s appeal, as Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh state, are "direct appeals to the reader and maintaining suspense" (630), and Nafisi's narrative techniques "recreate the past in the present, to give the impression that past memories have become present" (631).

Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh criticize Nafisi for not differentiating between a U.S. and an Iranian audience, even though she is extremely aware of the importance of audience:

"Although the text was written in English and published in the United States for a U.S. audience, Nafisi does not address the multiple overdeterminations of her subject matter – Iranian women – in the West" (631). While she is aware of her audience, Nafisi seems to ignore the different contexts and the additional interpretations that come with audiences that have different backgrounds. Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh argue that "context reveals itself to be central to interpretation, as what was subversive resistance in totalitarian Iran (…) can be easily appropriated by a conservative discourse in a post-culture was, post-September 11 U.S. context in which multiculturalism and Islam are under attack"(631).

This problematic aspect of Nafisi's work that Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh address fits into the criticism by other scholars who argue that Nafisi's work fits into Western anti-Islamic and anti-Iranian thought. It also fits into Re-Orientalism, as the Western reader will think of these Iranian women as the Other and will be confirmed in their Western ideas that think of Muslim and Arab women that they are all oppressed. "Tales of the totalitarian nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran inevitably take on a very different framing in the United States than they did in Iran because of the major difference in context" (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 631-632).

Keeping this in mind, *Reading Lolita* seems to have taken on a pre-dominantly U.S. context. Even the title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* implies an opposition between the West and the East. As Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh point out, the title can be interpreted as if Nabokov's work *Lolita*, a classic in American literature, implies to be the free, immoral, uncontrolled West. The city of Tehran implies, at least in Western context, the strict theocracy that adds to the oppression of the Muslim woman (632). Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh find that reading provides the bridge between these two different worlds, which appeals to readers from either cultural background, but in a different way: "the use of *Lolita* as an intertext

sensationalizes Iranian women's situation; the title is shocking in an Iranian context and tantalizing in a Western one" (632).

Not only the title, but the cover's image of two women in headscarves cater to Western expectation, as the veil is one of the major symbols of Islam in the West, which is often connected to women's oppression (632). According to scholar Hamid Dabashi, this picture of the two veiled women is taken out of context." The original picture from which this cover is excised is lifted off a news report during the parliamentary election of February 2000 in Iran. In the original picture, the two young women are in fact reading the leading reformist newspaper *Mosharekat*" (Dabashi). Dabashi calls the use of this picture in a different context "burglary from the press" and accuses Nafisi of distorting and staging a different purpose, stating "suggesting that the two young women are reading "Lolita" strips them of their moral intelligence and their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland, ushering them into a colonial harem" (Dabashi).

The veil as a symbol for women's oppression also returns throughout the book. Nafisi also opens her book with painting a picture, stating that the women only become themselves and can express their individuality when they take off their veil: "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 their own inimitable self" (Nafisi 4). Nafisi implies here that there is an opposition between wearing the veil and being a free woman who does not wear the veil, considering this piece of clothing connected to a religion, as most of the text's Western readers, as a symbol of women's oppression.

Not all Muslim or secular feminists view the hijab as a symbol of oppression; for some women it is even perceived as "a facilitator of education and mobility for women in the poorer and rural regions of Iran" and it "could be seen as one of the key topics (along with family laws) in the discourse on Muslim women's gender consciousness" and third-world

feminists have been struggling to "undo the Western assumption that wearing the veil automatically equals women's oppression" for over twenty years (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 633). According to Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh, Nafisi's seeming lack of awareness of Iranian feminist actions results in a problematic framing of criticism on male control of women in the Middle East. As U.S.-based Egyptian-American scholar Leila Ahmed explains, this type of criticism should be directly articulated in the Middle East, but framed very differently in the United States, since "a straightforward critique inevitably dredges up deeply rooted colonialist and orientalist stereotypes of backward Islam and the oppressed Muslim woman" (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 634).

Nafisi does provide some historical and political background, which shows that she is not completely unaware of activism for women's rights in Iran and attempts to add nuance to this issue. "Throughout that year, between the fall of 1979 and the summer of 1980, many events happened that changed the course of the revolution and of our lives. Battles being fought and lost. One of the most significant of these was over women's rights: from the very start, the government had waged a war against women, and the most important battles were being fought then" (Nafisi 111). Still, Nafisi does remain negative about the veil and connects it to female oppression. She attends protest meetings to demonstrate against "the government's attempts to impose the veil on women and its curtailment of women's rights" (Nafisi 111). However, nuance can be found when she describes her female students' conversation about wearing a veil in connection to men, where it is demonstrated that different meanings and opinions can be attached to wearing a veil: ""Can you imagine the kind of man who'd get sexually provoked just by looking at a strand of my hair?" said Nassrin" and in response, ""women who cover themselves are aiding and abetting the regime," said Azin with a defiant flourish" to which another student responds: ""And those whose trademark is painting their lips fiery red and flirting with male professors," said Manna

with an icy stare. "I suppose they are doing all this to further the cause?"" (70). Throughout the book, there are several discussions like these between the women about wearing the veil that result in more so contempt towards the compulsory aspect of wearing the veil and less towards the actual veil. As Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh state, "the memoir both illustrates the Western framework that equates the veil with women's oppression and offers a more subtle analysis of "the historic[al] dynamism of the veil**" (Fanon 1965, 63)"** (634), though considering the powerful Western stereotypes that are rooted within the book's Western audience, Nafisi should have handled this discussion with more caution.

Despite their criticism, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh do point out that Nafisi does break some stereotypes of Muslim women, as she focuses on the individual in the context of a regime, as strategy of resistance (635). For example, Nafisi compares the regime to Cincinnatus's executioners in *Lolita*: "The only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer, is to find a way to preserve one's individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other. That is why, in their world, rituals – empty rituals – become so central. There was not much difference between our jailers and Cincinnatus's executioners. They invaded all private spaces and tried to shape every gesture, to force us to become one of them, and that in itself was another form of execution" (Nafisi 77).

Still Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh identify the problematic aspect of this book being translated to a US context, as "readers will take it as a confirmation that the U.S. way of life and individualistic ethos are superior to others" (635), which is also very evident in the fact that the students treat the United States as the promised land, as a symbol for freedom, throughout the book, though it must be mentioned that Azar Nafisi herself is not decisively positive about the United States. Moreover, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh point out that an important way to counter orientalist perspectives is to give the reader a clear historical

framework to demonstrate "the complexity of individual situations," though Nafisi fails to do this, only providing a "very spotty historical background, which would be more than enough for Iranian readers" yet it could be argued that there is not enough historical context given for American readers, who are likely to be misguided by the text, interpreting it with their own Western historical background (640-641). They argue that there is a contradiction in the matter that Nafisi is "painfully aware" of the fact that the regime defines Iranian women as Muslim women under fundamentalist Islamic law, "yet she seems strangely unaware that Muslim women are also never free of Western readers' definition of them as inherently oppressed" (637).

Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh also argue that in a U.S. context, *Reading Lolita* reinforces Western, conservative assumptions about the British and American literary canon, predominantly written by white and male-identifying authors, "as having universal value and as being both necessary and sufficient" (637). They argue that, because of the fact that Nafisi, even though a diasporic female Iranian-American writer, centers her book around Western, white, mostly male canonical literature, it still fits into "the U.S. culture wars for those who seek to prevent multicultural perspectives from being included in the canon" (637). It must be taken into account here that the reason for this could also be the (political) time frame that Nafisi describes. When Nafisi left the United States to teach in Iran in 1979, she taught her Iranian students the critical perspectives on British and American literary studies of the 1960s and 1970s, even though these perspectives were already dated by then. British and American literary studies developed after Nafisi left the United States, but she was cut off at a time where the canon was still mostly white male and there were hardly any multicultural or feminist perspectives in literature (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh, 640).

At the same time, it is ironic that Nafisi points out Edward Said's theory in *Culture and Imperialism* in her book, though it is mentioned by Mr. Nahvi, an older student who is a

Muslim fundamentalist, in connection to Jane Austen. Nafisi herself sees irony in this as well: "it was ironic that a Muslim fundamentalist should quote Said against Austen. It was just as ironic that the most reactionary elements in Iran had come to identify with and co-opt the work and theories of those considered revolutionary in the West" (290). However, Nafisi contradicts Mr. Nahvi's theory and calls him out on the fact that he always speaks of the West in negative terms. There are other layers of irony to this, however, considering the fact that this Muslim fundamentalist student is explaining Said's theory to Nafisi, who is a teacher in Western literature and not the other way around, and the fact that Nafisi did not know this theory. Moreover, as Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh argue, there is irony in the fact that Nafisi's own work can also be appropriated to Said's theory, "this time by Westerners seeking a justification to vilify Islam wholesale" (637). They also argue that there is irony in the reciprocity of teaching American literature in Iran and then writing an American bestseller about it, as "Nafisi repeats insights gleaned in the United States in the 1970s, adapts them to an Iranian context, and then exports them back to the United States where they can be usefully appropriated by a conservative agenda and refurbished precisely because in the United States she can be presented as a multicultural subject having no need for anything but the white, primarily male, Western literary canon" (640).

It can be concluded that the main, common criticism of these different scholars is focused on the idea that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* fits into Western stereotypes of Iranian women and of the Arab and Muslim world in general, which is also the reason why it has such an appeal in the West and why it has become so successful. Even though Nafisi does nuance these Western assumptions and stereotypes a bit in her memoir, it is clear that Nafisi has not treated the difference between her Western audience and her Iranian audience with enough caution. This fits into Re-Orientalism, as this diasporic author demonstrates a

Westernized outlook, confirming stereotypes held in the West in a story about women from her homeland.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is Re-Orientalized to certain extent. After the events of 9/11, a distrust of the Muslim “Other” emerged and this Islamophobia can still be seen in literature today, and is also present in Nafisi’s book.

According to Lau, in Re-Orientalism, diasporic authors have a fragmented definition of self, taking bits and pieces from both their home country and their new country in the West to form their identity, which cannot be a true representative of the Orient. This hybridized sense of Self can also be found in Arab-Americans. According to Majaj, in Arab-American literature there is a path from not having a sense of home to belonging, which reflects Arab-Americans’ search for identity.

Due to media representation, stereotypes of the Arab identity have increased considerably and have been maintained by the media, which in turn have shaped the public’s opinion. This makes it hard for Arab-Americans to define their own identity, as being Arab and being American both change and reshape each other. Arab-American women have an additional struggle of gender, as there are several stereotypes in America that consider Arab women a victim of gender oppression, someone who is not free and needs to be saved. Freedom is one of the key aspects of North American culture, and also for feminists. This also makes it hard for Arab women to take a feminist stance. There is a general idea that these women need to change in order to belong. Arab-Americans struggle to fit into American society while still keeping their own culture alive, as the existing stereotypes about Arabs did not fit into Western thought. This complexity of a hybrid identity can also be seen in Nafisi’s work, as she aims to represent Iran in an authentic way, but her Western thoughts and opinions still shine through. It is therefore not an unusual progression that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* shows Re-Orientalist thoughts.

The memoir is criticized by several scholars for having a too Westernized outlook on Iranian politics and for fitting in easily with dominant U.S. ideology, reinforcing Western stereotypes of the Other, at the expense of Iranian culture. Nafisi herself is a Western-educated woman, whose family has also always been Westernized and this Western thought shines through in her work. Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh criticize Nafisi for not differentiating between an Iranian and a U.S. audience, though there is a world of difference between the two. Moreover, while Nafisi is critical of the Islam and Iranian politics, she seems unaware of Iranian feminist action. As Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh conclude, "in particular, Nafisi's rejection of political engagement, her critique of the hijab, her embrace of individual freedom in U.S. terms, and her reclaiming of the Western canon not only represent subversive resistance to Iranian theocratic totalitarianism but also lend themselves to an interpretation that would support an anti-Muslim and imperialist U.S. ideology" (Donadey & Ahmed-Ghosh 643). Some criticism should be more nuanced however. Some passages were taken out of context and Nafisi nuances some critiques in other parts in her book. Still, it is clear that the memoir has taken on a pre-dominantly US context.

A limitation of this thesis is that only this particular piece of diasporic literature is analyzed in terms of Re-Orientalism. Within the scope of this thesis it was not possible to analyze more books into such depths, which is why more research is needed. To further research this concept in other 21st century diasporic Arab-American literature, a book that comes to mind is *Mornings in Jenin* by Palestinian-American author Susan Abulhawa, which is about political conflicts between Palestine and Israel, written from the perspective of several members of a Palestinian family. Written by someone who is from Palestine and now resides in the West, there is a considerable chance that analysis of this book will reveal Re-Orientalized thought. Another book that comes to mind is the best-seller graphic two-part memoir *Persepolis* by French-Iranian author Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis* is about a family in

Tehran during the Iranian revolution and about the main character who leaves the country to live in the West. The complexity of the identity of the main character, as a result of growing up both in the East and the West comes forward in this book, which will very likely uncover Re-Orientalist characteristics. Other books by Arab-American authors who wrote about being Middle Eastern in post-9/11 America are Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* or Solmaz Sharif's poetry *Look*, considering that both works also deal with the complexities of the Arab-American identity, these books will also fit into Re-Orientalism.

The discourse of Re-Orientalism is especially relevant nowadays, as president Trump is intensifying the long-standing conflict between Iran and the United States, which started in 1979. Nafisi's memoir is the type of cultural representation that can influence international relations and politics. This can be dangerous due to the way this book distorts the representation of the Orient to a certain extent.

Nafisi has an incredibly large international readership and seems to have targeted the Western readership that has little to no knowledge about the Iranian culture and political situation in the country. As a result, Nafisi contributes to the distortion of Oriental representation and *Reading Lolita* can therefore be deemed a Re-Orientalist work.

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