CHAPTER THREE

Autobiomythography and Self-Aggrandizement in Iranian Diasporic Life-Writing

Fatemeh Keshavarz and Azar Nafisi

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If your image in the mirror is right,
Yourself, not the mirror, you must smite.¹
Nezami Ganjavi

Although neither Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (2003) nor Fatemeh Keshavarz’s Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran (2007) completely lends itself to discussion using the same tools that we usually adopt in analyzing Western modes of life-writing, both works still raise a question that is universally valid in this field: how much of the “true self” is disguised by the subject, the “I,” in each memoir? The “true self” is generally understood as referring to the author’s self, with the question concerning how far the author of an autobiographical work engages, whether consciously or unconsciously, in self-mythologizing. But the issue of subjectivity extends
beyond an author’s depiction of the autobiographical subject in the form of the author’s own actions and emotions: it is the lens through which the author creates an image of the external reality in which he or she is embedded. This image, like that of the personal self, may also be distorted, typically in ways that support the author’s autobiographical project. Drawing upon current theories in the genre of life-writing that tackle notions such as memory, selectivity, subjectivity, truth, and intention, I will argue that Keshavarz’s memoir is more prone to processes of distortion than is Nafisi’s—although Keshavarz and a host of other critics, including Hamid Dabashi, hold a different opinion in their criticisms of Nafisi.

Keshavarz’s *Jasmine and Stars* opens with the ambitious claim that her book will help Westerners to see the humanity in “the Other”—here, the Iranians. Keshavarz’s springboard for this daunting task is Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* which Keshavarz criticizes for its apparent inaccuracies and distortions of various sorts. While these allegations may or may not be true—Nafisi’s memoir (much like any other memoir) entails some exaggerations and omissions that reflect decisively on Iranian culture, religion, and politics—Keshavarz’s response to Nafisi is far from objective. Yet the aspects from Iranian culture that are left out and those that are highlighted serve two completely different purposes for each writer. The weaknesses in *Reading Lolita* are mostly those that are typical of any type of memoir; they are, more often than not, inevitable. Keshavarz’s memoir, however, fulfills a totally different purpose: it aims to project to people not familiar with Iran an image of Iranian society that is homogeneous, placid, and generally quite pleasant. In short, one might classify *Jasmine and Stars* as a work of creative nonfiction.

Keshavarz begins by recounting a well-known anecdote from Rumi’s *Mathnavi,* a version of the famous fable of the blind men and the elephant, which cautions against “the dangers of partial or distorted vision” (Keshavarz 1). In this version, those examining the elephant are not blind but are working in the pitch dark. The story concludes with the lesson that if these people had only had some candles, they would have been able to see that they were in fact all describing the same beast. As Keshavarz explains, in writing her memoir, she hopes to provide “a candle to remove—or at least to reduce—the depth of the dark” (4). Implicit in this hope is the claim that, with the aid of an apparently infallible memory, Keshavarz, as candle holder, will illuminate an accurate and comprehensive portrait of Iran:

In *Jasmine and Stars,* I carefully and painstakingly weave a multihued tapestry of human voice and experience. I turn my narrating voice into a vehicle for the rainbow of the faces and words that filled my childhood and youth in
Iran. I will not select any particular time period, target any specific political movement, privilege any class or gender, or handpick any specific social event. This is no ideological war for or against any. It is designed to be a meaningful excursion into modern-day Iran: a culture as charming, creative, humorous, and humane as any. A culture that has much to offer the world.

You will laugh and cry with me and all the ordinary Iranians you will meet, some from my own family and many I could not myself have met. The compelling voices you will hear will not be those of politicians and ideologues, but of writers and poets as well as family members and friends. If we have succeeded in transcending the I-know-the-elephant attitude, the recognition of the multiplicity of voices will empower us to resist all totalizing and silencing efforts. The trick is to listen for the seemingly insignificant voices that carry the wisdom, tenderness, beauty, and humor in a culture, to open the door and let them into the safety of our recognition. If there are brighter candles, I have yet to find them. (5–6)

She goes on to declare that “Jasmine and Stars is a celebration of the common humanity shared among people of differing circumstances—religious, cultural, and geopolitical” (7).

Like any other society, that of Iran has both positive and negative sides. Keshavarz’s efforts to deny or, failing that, to justify some of the less attractive sides of Iranian culture only undermine the credibility of her own narrative. In contrast, in her opening “Author’s Note,” Nafisi acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of any autobiographical narrative: “The facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful.” After all, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, “In the act of remembering, the autobiographical subject actively creates the meaning of the past. Thus, narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered” (9). And as Daniel Schachter contends, “Memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves” (6). Nafisi’s stance right at the beginning of her memoir attests to her familiarity with the principles and boundaries of the task she has undertaken; Keshavarz’s claim to have written Jasmine and Stars with the aid of an unfailing memory only undermines the authenticity of her response to Reading Lolita.

Of the other major differences between Nafisi and Keshavarz, their widely different upbringing and backgrounds (educational and otherwise) reflect naturally and decisively on each author’s perspective and approach. When Nafisi looks back at her life, she does so more as a Westernized Iranian, if not a Westerner. She is
immersed in Western culture and literature as a result of her upbringing and education, which occurred, beginning at an early age, largely in the West. Keshavarz, however, looks back at her past as most Iranians would do; she is concerned with the image projected in the work (not just of herself, but also of Iranian society at large), since she spent her formative years in the country of her birth and left Iran as an adult.

In *Words, Not Swords*, Farzaneh Milani describes *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as “an innovative and complex blending of various genres—memoir, biography, autobiography, literary criticism, and political tract . . . as an art form that recognizes no geographical or temporal boundaries” (218). And yet autobiography, as we know it in the West, did not exist as a genre in Iranian culture until the past few decades. Despite this absence, a host of biographies and poems, both classical and modern, that contain autobiographical elements have in fact been produced by Iranians. There is, however, one main difference between all of these works (with the exception of some modernist poems) and their Western counterparts. William Hanaway notes that, in the work of a Western autobiographer, “weaknesses and darker aspects of the life are not suppressed.” The emphasis in a Western autobiography, he argues, “is not on making a public image but rather on trying to understand the meaning of the life in its context” (58–59). In most of the Persian works, the objective is instead to put forward, in Ira Nadel’s words, “an example or model of moral and didactic value for readers” (59–60).

A quick look at *Jasmine and Stars* provides us with numerous instances in which the author projects such one model, not just of herself but of Iranian society on a larger scale. Ironically, Keshavarz accuses Nafisi of presenting a “selective and exaggerated account of life in postrevolutionary Iran” (6). Describing *Reading Lolita* as a “New Orientalist” narrative, Keshavarz argues that Nafisi’s account is “troubling” because “through its polarized vision of the world, it denies the value of listening. Instead, it contributes to the rising heat in the fiery East-West rhetoric.” As she concludes, “The dehumanization of Muslims in the West and the diabolic representation of the West by Muslim extremists are both silencing narratives that have resulted from this heated polarization” (11). And yet the didactic stories in Keshavarz’s own memoir almost always rest on exaggerations of their own. On the one hand, we have the beautification of Iranian culture, and on the other, the demonization of anyone who criticizes it. The narrative can be compared to a children’s book in which some characters, usually those related to the narrating voice, are predominantly good, pious, and largely wronged and in which anyone
who holds a different stance than the narrator is self-serving. This black-and-white dichotomy is foreshadowed in the first chapter of the book, in which Keshavarz uses the metaphors of jasmine and stars to refer to the good insiders, while the bad outsiders are “grasshoppers.” She also refers to the different events in her childhood as “stations,” undeniably alluding to the Sufi stages and stations. In addition to having elicited the wide range of adverse feedback usually invoked by such comparisons, the reference is considered by many to be blasphemous. Keshavarz is, however, at ease in imbuing her childhood with a “mystical” aura.

No one in Keshavarz’s family seems to have any serious flaws or shortcomings; indeed, she idolizes her uncle and, to a lesser extent, her parents, grandmother, siblings, friends, and neighbours. Speaking of her ex-husband, she shares no traits that are even slightly negative or improper for fear of damaging the unreal and highly subjective image she has projected of the “Muslim Iranian man.” She explicitly compares her uncle to the great Sufi Bayazid Bastami. In her eyes, an individual who endeavours to free himself from seeking people’s approval necessarily resembles Bayzaid Bastami (64–65). She likens her uncle to a shining star, alluding to the Sufi cosmology of love and the “classic metaphor” that compares wise guides and leaders to stars: “My uncle would simply enter the room, and everything would appear in a different light” (79). Toward the end of her the memoir, Keshavarz expands this description: “I can easily compare my uncle the painter to a saint. In fact, I have a hard time imagining a saint in any other way” (145). She goes on to draw a contrast with her father, who “was not a saint by any stretch of the imagination. He was emotional, demanding, and easily offended.” But even her father is immediately issued a reprieve. A few lines later, she describes him using these words: “If I were to choose one adjective to describe Baba, I would say ‘generosity’ without a moment’s hesitation” (145).

The use of sublime terminology and analogies in *Jasmine and Stars* is completely in accordance with the focus in some, if not most, Iranian biographies on figures who, as Hanaway notes, are “larger than life” (60), including poets, Sufis, and saints. Thus, for an Iranian writer like Keshavarz, who seems to have strong religious sentiments, it only makes sense to take advantage of these convenient models rather than attempt an alternative style with possible hazardous consequences. Hanaway’s observations and the self-aggrandizement that is characteristic of the narrating voice in *Jasmine and Stars* are reminiscent of Michael Benton’s description of biomythography: “a process of gathering and organising the scattered fragments of the past to meet the needs of the present” (224). My detailed
analysis of *Jasmine and Stars* as a distinct example of what I am calling “autobiomythography” follows, to a large extent, the process in biomythographies that Benton outlines in his study of several biographies of prominent Western literary figures, such as the Brontë sisters, Byron, Dickens, and Sylvia Plath:

1. the first biographer is commissioned, selects and establishes a factual history, giving the “facts” a particular “spin”;
2. the facts become fictionalized, typically through the writings of the subject as well as those of the biographer;
3. the fiction, in turn, becomes mythologized as its characters and landscape become symbols;
4. the myth is transmuted into a variety of “factions” in different media—stories accepted as based on fact but embellished with invented elements; and
5. modern biographers attempt to demythologize this process by returning to primary sources. (212)

Of course, not all of these steps are tightly applicable to the memoir in question: in addition to the main differences in the sub-genres to which *Jasmine and Stars* and the biographies listed by Benton subscribe, the subject in *Jasmine and Stars* is not a historical or prominent literary figure.

The figure of this autobiography is Keshavarz. The undesirable sides of life, as far as Keshavarz’s selective memory aids her, are trivial, including, for instance, a female servant who fasts during her pregnancy because she is uneducated but very pious. There is also Keshavarz’s “half-crazy” neighbour who murders her teenage daughter because she had “gotten pregnant” (30). Keshavarz balances this highly unusual and “undesirable” incident with the story of the poor charcoal seller, also living in the writer’s neighbourhood, who, despite being illiterate, is open-minded enough to ask the Keshavarz family to help her daughters to learn to read and write.

In another part of her memoir, Keshavarz shares the story of her “prominent geneticist friend,” an Iranian who had to leave his native country and his research incomplete because “his professional aspirations” that dealt with “controversial matters” had not been “received favorably by certain clerical figures of a less liberal background” (74; my emphasis). This tragic incident, which Keshavarz treats as a singular case, is actually highly representative of many Iranian experts who live abroad because of the limitations they have faced within the country; sadly,
Keshavarz euphemizes this incident as “professional aspirations” not having been “received favorably.”

When Keshavarz criticizes Iranian society, she almost always has in mind the era before the 1979 Revolution. Indeed, her frustration extends back to the time of the Persian Empire and Cyrus the Great himself, who, in the author’s words, “had freed the captive Jews of Babylon” (40). Keshavarz interprets this historic event as the root cause of Iranians thinking they are “genetically purified of racial prejudice forever” (40), a belief that she implies is expressed in Reading Lolita, despite there being no indication of it. Furthermore, Keshavarz regrettably fails to support this hypothesis about Iranians by presenting relevant examples. This statement also indicates that in her defence of her native culture, Keshavarz prioritizes Islamic culture over Iranian culture, which at other times, she uses interchangeably.

One of the reasons why Iranians have not adopted Western modes of life-writing is because autobiography, unlike all other genres, is more a cultural than a literary phenomenon (Hanaway 61). Moreover, in Farzaneh Milani’s words, “its absence is perhaps the logical extension of a culture that creates, expects, and even values a sharply defined separation between the inner and the outer, the private and the public” and of the various types of censorship that could follow from it. “In short,” Milani concludes, “it could be one more manifestation of strong forces of deindividuation, protection, and restraint” (“Veiled Voices” 2). If we read Jasmine and Stars against this observation, we begin to understand many of the omissions and exaggerations in the work. And reading the work in this light also elucidates the roots of Keshavarz’s profound disillusionment with Nafisi’s memoir. Keshavarz appears to be oblivious to the fact that in a memoir, one’s private life and public image do not and should not necessarily correspond.

Moreover, Jasmine and Stars, following the tradition of most contemporary Iranian memoirs (Princess Ashraf Pahlavi’s Faces in a Mirror is just one example), ends at exactly the same spot where the narrator started in terms of emotional and intellectual growth—Keshavarz, the professor of comparative literature today, remembers the details of her conversations about classical Persian poetry “at the age of five or six” with her parents as she discusses the matter in her concluding chapter. Following that tradition, the narrating voice in the memoir also delineates a “firm belief in the author’s privileged knowledge of herself, of her ‘real,’ ‘unified’ self” and reveals “a totally different private self beneath the ‘social’ one” (Milani, “Veiled Voices” 14), as seen in numerous sections of the book, especially in the introductory chapter (“What Does the Elephant Look Like?”) and the concluding
one (“Tea with My Father and the Saints”). It is important to note, however, that Keshavarz almost nowhere in *Jasmine and Stars* charges Nafisi with being self-obsessed, although she is critical of many other aspects of *Reading Lolita*.

The reason behind the absence of the narcissism charge is twofold, in my view. First, there is little on which to base it, given that no indication of self-obsession can be found in Nafisi’s memoir, and, second, Keshavarz may be cognizant of the explicit note of vanity associated with her own narrating voice in *Jasmine and Stars*. This self-admiration is nowhere as apparent as in the episode where Keshavarz discusses her radio show. As she makes a point of telling her readers, she has developed a “close relationship” with her audience, who are in the habit of writing to her “daily.” On the occasion she recalls, she has just conducted an interview with the chancellor of a major university, during which she daringly asked him “bold questions.” Fearing that her intemperate behaviour may have angered the show’s producer, she goes looking for him, but he is nowhere to be found. She continues:

I returned to the studio and threw myself on an armchair we used for resting between air times. A letter from a listener had been sitting on the side table since midday, and I opened it. A young carpenter was returning to school because my show had inspired him write his own poetry. Wow! Who cared about the outcome of the interview with the chancellor? I read the letter once more then lifted my head and noticed a red reflection in the glass parting the two sections of the studio. A beautiful bouquet of carnations was sitting on the table next to the entrance. It had been placed there when I was reading the letter. The note attached to it said, “Let’s have him for a second interview. That is, if he survives this one! You were fabulous.” (46–47)

Despite her opening claim that she will “carefully and painstakingly weave a multihued tapestry of human voice and experience,” selectivity and bias inform, or rather misinform, Keshavarz’s memoir. At one point, the narrating voice, perhaps naïvely, admits to the selective approach adopted in the memoir: “Too many good things fall through the cracks in many books written about the country of my birth and the people who nurtured me. So I have decided to write one that focuses on the good things, one that gives voice to what has previously been silenced and overlooked” (15–16). In other words, Keshavarz confesses that she is not going to portray an objective and neutral picture of the country of her birth. At the same time, Keshavarz criticizes *Reading Lolita* for “its slanted vision,” condemning Nafisi’s “partial and exaggerated portrayal of Iran and its Muslim inhabitants” (17).
Keshavarz also denounces Nafisi for portraying a static and threatening image of men in contemporary Iranian society, calling Nafisi’s sharing of memories about several of her radical students at Tehran University a “dehumanization of Muslims” (62). Keshavarz apparently ignores the parts in Reading Lolita where Nafisi portrays a neutral, unthreatening, and even pleasant image of some Iranian men who were part of her life in Iran. Nafisi’s “magician,” her mentor, is only one example (139–40). Granted, Nafisi does paint an unfavourable portrait of her ex-husband, a Westernized Iranian who had attended university in the United States and brought her back there with him. He was, she writes, “insanely jealous,” fixated on worldly success, and “wanted his wife to dress smartly, do her nails, go to the hairdresser every week”—wishes against which she rebelled by wearing “long skirts and tattered jeans” (83). As she later admits, “I chose to marry a man I despised deep down,” someone who “wanted a chaste and virginal wife” but whose own morality was governed by a double standard: before returning to Iran for the summer and marrying Nafisi (who was not yet eighteen), “he had been living with an American girl he had introduced to everyone as his wife” (298). It thus appears that Nafisi’s contempt for her first husband was rooted in his lack of integrity, the result of his only partial embrace of Western values. It is also surprising that Keshavarz passes judgment on Nafisi when the latter indicates that some revolutionary students, like Forsati, and some of the writer’s colleagues, like Mrs. Rezvan, were opportunists (114). But why should Nafisi not have expressed this concern? We have all come into contact with opportunist people at some point in our lives.

Keshavarz also takes issue with a scene in which Nassrin, one of the students in Nafisi’s reading group, describes her mother, who came from an affluent family that espoused liberal values but who married a man whose own family was religious. Here, Keshavarz criticizes the idea that a deeply religious Muslim woman would not be likely to engage in making “fancy French food” or in teaching her children English (Keshavarz 62; cf. Nafisi 53–54). Keshavarz seems to be unaware of the attitude of most deeply religious people in Iran toward Western languages, cuisine, art, and so on, especially during the first decade following the Islamic Revolution—and of the fact that the English language was banned from most schools in that particular period. It is also perplexing that Keshavarz raises her eyebrow when Nassrin reveals that her mother never saw her American high school friends again following her marriage. In other words, in addition to restricting her daughter’s movements, Nassrin’s father evidently did the same to his wife. Keshavarz interprets the inclusion of this information as evidence of Nafisi’s own
hostility to Iranian culture generally and Iranian men in particular. But Nassrin is simply describing reality. Shirin Ebadi, in *Iran Awakening*, recounts a similar event concerning her neighbours, in which the “very religious father married his eldest daughter off to an even more pious bazaarī” (described as “a trader or merchant, usually of deeply traditional background”), who “forbade her to visit her own parents unaccompanied” (106–07). One wonders whether, by querying the episode, Keshavarz is implying that Nafisi is fabricating these events in order to portray Iranian men in a negative light—or is she suggesting that she should not have written about such things?

Keshavarz’s critique of *Reading Lolita* is imbued with uninformed anger (something that she accuses Nafisi of), flawed accusations, and unsubstantiated assertions and remarks. Had Keshavarz been in Iran during its early post-revolutionary period, she probably would not have so perfunctorily dismissed the factual accounts in Nafisi’s memoir. If Keshavarz had referenced people and authorities like Shirin Ebadi, mentioned in *Jasmine and Stars* (116), more responsibly, her critique would have been more credible. If she had studied Ebadi’s memoir, *Iran Awakening*, to learn about the Nobel Peace Laureate’s similar, if not exact, recapturing of events during the period about which Nafisi was writing, she might have written a very different book.

Another of Keshavarz’s unwarranted criticisms of Nafisi is that the latter refers to her (Muslim) male students by their last names. This more formal way of referring to these students, argues Keshavarz, prevents the reader from getting to know them (112). In contrast, the female students who visit Nafisi weekly at her home are called by their first names, and, as readers, we get to know them more thoroughly. Supposedly, this reveals a bias on the part of Nafisi against the male students. But this criticism merely speaks to Keshavarz’s lack of familiarity with the academic world in Iran. Within Iranian post-secondary and secondary institutions, and even in some elementary schools, students—regardless of age, gender, religion, or ethnicity—are mostly referred to in a formal manner, by their surnames. The reason we know the first names of the female students is that they, as a group, visit Nafisi weekly at her house to discuss world literary masterpieces: Nafisi and these female students do have a more intimate relationship than usually exists between professors and their students in the formal and rigid setting of a classroom.

Keshavarz further accuses Nafisi of creating stereotypical categories of people, to which the actions of specific individuals then predictably conform (113). Nafisi’s descriptions of certain public events, she argues, are filled with people who
illustrate one such category, which Keshavarz chooses to label “the Ugly” (114). They are, she argues, mere caricatures, variations on a single theme, and are presented in a very unflattering light simply because they are, in one way or another, proponents of an Islamic culture. But if readers cannot attest to the credibility of Nafisi’s descriptions through their first-hand experience, they can easily find photographs of the crowds of people that Nafisi describes eating on the roadsides during Khomeini’s funeral and of Iranians picnicking daily outside the occupied American embassy (Nafisi 244, 104; cf. Keshavarz 114, 129). Anyone who has seen these images or experienced the events can confirm the accuracy of Nafisi’s accounts; by criticizing Nafisi for depicting reality, Keshavarz once again undermines her own credibility. In a somewhat similar vein, Keshavarz takes exception to Nafisi’s description of Persian dancing as highly seductive, “elusive,” “sinewy,” and “tactile” compared to Western dancing (131; cf. Nafisi 265). Although anyone who has seen Persian dancers perform would be unlikely to quarrel with Nafisi’s description, Keshavarz argues that Nafisi views Persian dance from an “Othering” perspective, transforming it into an exotic object of scrutiny.

I used to live in the same quiet cul-de-sac in Tehran as Nafisi did. The hospital on the other side of our serene street was privately owned before the 1979 Revolution, as Nafisi describes it in Reading Lolita. After the Revolution, however, the hospital was confiscated by the government and the tranquility ended: throughout the week and especially on weekends, crowds of people would arrive to visit patients in the hospital. More often than not, these visitors had come from distant places, suburbs of Tehran and other cities, and more often than not, small children—often whining in the heat of summer or the cold of winter—could be heard playing and crying for hours on the street as their parents waited patiently just on the other side of the gates to our houses, which separated us from the hubbub outside. The visitors’ vehicles, often parked quite literally in the middle of the street, made it difficult for residents to get in and out. Nafisi has captured this situation with much precision and truthfulness, recalling how, seated in her living room with her back to the window, she “could hear the sound of children shouting, crying and laughing, and, mingled in, their mothers’ voices, also shouting, calling out their children’s names and threatening them with punishments”—the world beyond her window coming to her “only through the disembodied noises emanating from below” (8).

Yet, again, this passage in her memoir has come under the criticism of Keshavarz, who sees it as evidence of Nafisi’s elite disdain for ordinary humanity,
implying that Nafisi should not have complained about this matter at all. She supports this critique with yet another flawed argument, stating that the eternal Forough Farrokhzad—whom every student of Nafisi knows their teacher revere—would have liked the commotion, as she “wrote about this hubbub in one of her most famous short poems” (139). And, as if this hijacking of Farrokhzad’s take on the overall liveliness of crowds is not enough, Keshavarz also argues: “If you live in an apartment building in Tehran, Rome, or Istanbul, hearing the hubbub in the street is a joyful sound. It tells you that life is going on outside your window” (139). Here, Nafisi is being criticized for having recorded her thoughts honestly in response to the stimulants of her social world. But to criticize someone for speaking candidly, on the grounds that what is said fails to paint a sufficiently positive picture—to suggest that the person should instead have remained quiet—not only illustrates the very sort of “totalizing and silencing efforts” that Keshavarz claims must be resisted but also undermines the hope that one day Iranians will be able to tolerate criticism directed at them, whether personally and nationally. It certainly contradicts Michael Hillmann’s hopeful assertion that “Farrokhzad’s unveiled and unmasked poetic modernism and individuality have opened the way for Iranian poets henceforth to choose without inhibition specific poetic modes for their poetic effects and not to feel conventional fear of social, political, or cultural consequences” (52–53).

Keshavarz, in her argument, implies that Nafisi and others who have critiqued some aspects of Iranian society and politics are necessarily supportive of the idea of the superpowers invading Iran and that they have no objection to the wrong and unlawful invasion of Iraq (123). She has failed to realize that many people are against any type of conflict and war, let alone an invasion by the United States, but have the courage to voice their concerns about their countries of origin based on their experiences. The least the rest of us who are less daring can do is to allow others to express their constructive criticism.

Unfortunately, a similar opinion is held by some other critics of Reading Lolita. I do not know what Nafisi’s political stance is regarding the idea of a regime change in Iran. I would be very disappointed, however, to discover that Nafisi has, in fact, been supportive of such a change, because, as we know, Iranians from all walks of life took part in the Revolution that resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic, which currently has the support of many Iranians within and outside the country. Despite weaknesses and mistakes committed by the Islamic Republic, many Iranians remain hostile to the idea of any type of interference, including a
military interference or invasion by the United States. It would, indeed, be very disheartening to find that Nafisi supports such foreign interference. Yet, unlike most of my colleagues, that knowledge would not be helpful to me at all in my analysis of Reading Lolita; is it not one of the first and foremost rules of our discipline to judge literary works, including memoirs, by their content and style only and not by extra-textual factors? This issue brings to mind Phillippe Lejeune’s assertion about autobiography:

[A]s far as the author is concerned, there can be a shifting between the initial intention and that which the reader will finally attribute to him, either because the author misunderstands the effects induced by the mode of presentation that he has chosen, or because between him and the reader there exist other postures: many elements that condition the reading (subtitle, generic classification, publicity, publisher’s blurb) may have been chosen by the publisher and already interpreted by the media. (126)

In their critiques of Reading Lolita, Keshavarz, Roksana Bahramitash, and Hamid Dabashi, among others, have indeed allowed themselves to be influenced by “elements that condition the reading,” interpreting the text in the light of extra-textual factors. It is both illuminating and alarming that in her article “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism,” Bahramitash draws conclusions on the basis of individuals who have endorsed Reading Lolita. To Bahramitash (as to many others who have been unable to see the big picture without being confused by extra-textual factors), the fact that Nafisi acknowledges the support of “her boss at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington,” Fouad Ajami, whom Bahramitash refers to as Nafisi’s neo-conservative mentor, is reason enough to believe that Reading Lolita reinforces Bush’s contemptuous and highly problematic description of Iran as “a member of an ‘axis of evil’ and an ‘outpost of tyranny’” (Bahramitash 230; cf. Nafisi 347). Another individual with whom Bahramitash takes issue is Bernard Lewis, “the guru of the neo-conservatives,” who praised the insight offered by Reading Lolita into “teaching Western literature” in “Revolutionary Iran”—a commentary that Bahramitash locates on the back cover of Nafisi’s memoir. This does not exemplify scholarly and responsible criticism—judging the work by its endorsers and, even worse, condemning it because the author’s parents “had political ties to the regime of the last shah” (Bahramitash 230) or discarding it on the grounds that Nafisi herself was “an upper-class woman” who had “a privileged life” (Keshavarz 136). This restrictive biographical mode of
analysis has long been considered outdated and insufficient for objective, precise, and scholarly textual analysis.

In an interview that appeared not long after the publication of his “Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire,” Hamid Dabashi was asked whether, in his condemnation of Reading Lolita as an “extension of American imperial hegemony,” he was mainly referring to “the substance of the writing or the events surrounding its publication and popularity in the United States.” He responded by insisting that his critique was “almost entirely directed at the substance of RLT, with a very minimum attention to its context” (Khosmood). He immediately followed this assertion with a description of Reading Lolita as “the portrayal of a figment of imagination called ‘the West’ as the arbiter of truth and salvation, and the dismissal of ‘non-Western’ cultures as banal and diabolical.” Despite his insistence that his assessment of Nafisi’s memoir is founded on its substance, his critique both in the interview and in his “Native Informers” article suggests that even this competent critic is reading the text against the background of circumstances external to the memoir itself, namely, the political atmosphere and events following 9/11.

Like Bahramitash, Dabashi approaches Nafisi’s memoir from a non-literary perspective, basing his critique primarily on extra-textual grounds, including what he calls Nafisi’s “pathetic career opportunism and neocon connections” (Khosmood). Although Dabashi claims that he has remained focused on the “substance” in Reading Lolita and has not traded textual evidence for its irrelevant “context,” consider the passage from his article in which Nafisi is described as “employed by the US Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, indoctrinated by the father of American neoconservatives Leo Strauss (and his infamous tract Persecution and the Art of Writing), coached by the Lebanese Shi'i neocon artist Fouad Ajami, wholeheartedly endorsed by Bernard Lewis (the most wicked ideologue of the US war on Muslims),” and as “an ex-professor of English literature with not a single credible book or scholarly credential to her name other than Reading Lolita in Tehran.” He goes on to call Nafisi “an Oriental servant of a white-identified, imperial design” to make an extended argument on the basis of the photograph that appears on the cover of the book.

It is noteworthy that, in the interview, Dabashi admits that he is not privy to any information that would directly connect Nafisi with the proponents of the war in Iraq and a possible war with Iran. Indeed, there is not a single line in his original article that links textual evidence from the memoir with the contextual
evidence that he and others have offered in their condemnation of Nafisi’s ties with the neocons. Rather, as far as the memoir itself is concerned, his accusation that Nafisi serves as a “native informer” is based mainly on the fact that, as a professor of English and American literature in Iran, she supported students in reading Anglo-American literary classics. In Dabashi’s interpretation, Nafisi’s admiration for Western literature translates into a desire for an American imperialistic takeover of her country of birth.

I would like to reiterate here that Nafisi’s political views can be critiqued by anyone who wishes to do so. However, this topic should be addressed within a framework suitable for that type of analysis, a framework most certainly separate from an analysis of Reading Lolita. As I have argued above, on the basis of the text itself, no critic has been able to support the idea that Nafisi’s memoir was written to facilitate a takeover by the Americans—that, as Dabashi’s critique would have it, the memoir seeks to “neutralise competing sites of cultural resistance to the US imperial designs both at home and abroad.” Such a position cannot be defended except by drawing inferences from information external to the narrative, which are then imposed on the content of the memoir, in a process of reading meaning into a text rather than extracting meaning from it. But Iranian literary critics, however sincere and capable they may be, are making a grave error in deprecating Nafisi’s memoir on the basis of mere inferences and, even worse, ad hominem arguments concerning Nafisi’s “opportunism” and allegedly deficient scholarly credentials. And, after all, other academics, such as Farzaneh Milani, have openly praised Nafisi’s “passion for literature, democracy, and human rights,” as it animates Reading Lolita (Words, Not Swords 218).

Keshavarz argues, quite justifiably, that a trend can be seen in most of the works of fiction and nonfiction written about the Middle East in the West today. She calls this type of literature the “New Orientalist narrative,” which, in accordance with the dominant political atmosphere in the West, especially after the events of 9/11, distorts the realities of life and the rich and complex cultures in the Middle East and vilifies its peoples, as did its predecessor. As she points out, the “old Orientalist” narrative sought to justify “the colonial presence of Europe in the Eastern Hemisphere,” with or without actually advocating “a full military presence in the region” (2). The New Orientalist version, she argues, exhibits “many similarities to and a few differences from the earlier incarnation” (3). Both are marked, for example, by oversimplification, as is illustrated in the New Orientalist narrative’s tendency to explain “almost all undesirable Middle Eastern incidents in terms of
Muslim men’s submission to God and Muslim women’s submission to men” (3). She further argues that while “the new narrative does not necessarily support overt colonial ambitions,” neither does it “hide its clear preference for a western political and cultural takeover” (3).

Among the books that Keshavarz criticizes as examples of New Orientalist narrative are Reading Lolita and Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner. However, while Nafisi and Hosseini are highly critical of the governing administrations in Iran and Afghanistan, respectively, there is no suggestion in either work that the authors would necessarily want their countries to be redeemed by the West. Why can’t artists take issue with problems they see in their countries of birth? What could the rationale be for not supporting or following potential Western models (on different levels) if they are practical, efficient, and more democratic? Is criticizing domestic and foreign policies necessarily a blind embrace of the West? There is no question that there are misconceptions about the Middle East and Islam and misrepresentations of Middle Eastern peoples and Muslims. It remains irrefutable that Orientalist views about the Middle East exist and that misconceptions, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations have particularly multiplied since 9/11 and the events that followed. There are most certainly books being written and movies (such as Not Without My Daughter) being produced today that further the vilification and demonization of the people of the Middle East and reinforce mainstream media reports. But the existence of these works does not necessarily make every critical work about the region treacherous and destructive.

Keshavarz’s overarching thesis can be summarized as follows: New Orientalist narratives like Nafisi’s and Hosseini’s project distorted, oversimplified, and unduly negative images of Iran, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern countries, which only exacerbate tensions with the West. Therefore, writers who are originally from these parts of the world should strive to keep criticisms of their home countries mild and to a minimum, and, if they cannot do that, then they should remain silent. Keshavarz objects to Nafisi’s memoir—which is based on its author’s personal and professional experiences as an Iranian citizen, daughter, wife, mother, and university professor—because it calls attention to some of the less attractive aspects of post-revolutionary Iran. Yet, as Smith and Watson observe, an autobiographer’s subjectivity is grounded in social realities:

Experience is the process through which a person becomes a certain type of subject with certain kinds of identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic, and interpsychic relations. . . . In
effect, autobiographical subjects know themselves as subjects of particular kinds of experience attached to social statuses and identities. (9, 10)

Keshavarz, however, argues that a writer’s fidelity to subjective experience must be tempered by “responsibility,” in the form of due concern for the potential consequences of truth telling:

One important issue that works such as RLT raise for those of us in the academy is the responsibility of the intellectual from the non-Western world representing the culture of her origin. Such an intellectual is caught between two equally uninviting prospects. The first is pushing the less desirable aspects of her native culture under the carpet, as it were, so as to avoid its further vil-lainization. The downside of this is depriving her readers (particularly people of her native culture) of the fruits of her knowledge and criticism. The second is criticizing—and ideally improving—her native culture at the possible cost of making it more vulnerable to political, cultural—even military—attacks from the dominant culture. (29)

This comment goes a long way toward explaining Keshavarz’s approach and objective in Jasmine and Stars. Keshavarz sees a need for Iranian intellectuals to carefully package their presentation of their country to the West, rather than telling the whole truth, as that might result in an invasion by the “dominant culture.” Referring to Nafisi, Keshavarz states, “One is naturally proud of the success of a writer coming from one’s culture of origin. Things get complicated, however, when the writing provides insider ‘evidence’ that we are by and large the under-developed ‘Orientals’ everyone had thought we were” (28). Again, one wonders whether Keshavarz can be unaware that her stance implies the need to practice self-censorship.

Nafisi supports an apolitical kind of Islam that was and still is practiced by many devout Muslims globally. There is no conflict between this approach to Islam and the structures and practices that prevail in Western democracies. Nafisi tells one of her radical Islamic students, Mr. Bahri, about her grandmother, whom she recalls as “the most devout Muslim I had ever known” but who also “shunned politics” (103). She remembers how her grandmother resented the fact that, during the reign of Reza Shah, her veil, “which to her was a symbol of her sacred relationship to God, had become an instrument of power” (103). Nafisi values respect and tolerance toward people of different faiths and ideological orientations, as is implied both in the above passage and elsewhere in Reading Lolita. This is indeed
the attitude of many Muslim scholars and intellectuals, including Shirin Ebadi in *Iran Awakening* (see, for example, 39–40, 121–22, 204), about whom Keshavarz writes with reverence in *Jasmine and Stars*.

I do not mean to suggest that nothing of value can be found in *Jasmine and Stars*. Keshavarz’s pride in her culture is clearly very genuine. She writes, for example, of Iranians’ deep feelings for literature:

I had lived, studied, and worked on three continents, and if there was a culture in which people expressed their enthusiasm for literature more publicly than in Iran, I could not think of one. It would be difficult to live in Iran and not see that this enthusiasm was not limited to the educated elite either. How many a baker, shopkeeper, or taxi driver had I heard whispering Omar Khayyam under his breath. (19)

Keshavarz goes on to narrate an incident in which a “lovely, elderly Buddhist lady” asks whether Iranians eat with their hands. Keshavarz describes why she was upset: “Not because eating with one’s hands is such a disgrace. But because, despite all the stereotypes that I had encountered in Iran, and despite the way the Iranian Revolution had demonized America, I had not imagined the world in two irreconcilable halves of East and West” (25). She concludes that she “certainly was not prepared to accept that any particular part of the world would have a monopoly on sophistication” (25). Keshavarz also points to an erroneous assumption, common to most people in the West, that equates literacy with civilization. In Keshavarz’s words, “In the print-dominated Western culture, illiteracy equals ignorance, lack of insight, and lack of refinement. As she thoughtfully observes, “We have an essentialist way of reducing civility and culture to technology and less institutionalized forms of education to savagery andcrudeness” (45).

As Susanne Egan, a Western critic, acknowledges, autobiography is no longer the prerogative of “great men”:

From a far wider base of education and literacy than obtained a hundred years ago, and from a fuller recognition of the dignity inherent in every kind of human nature, we now find literary talent and a strong autobiographical impulse emerging from all walks of life. The palm has passed from white, middle-class men of distinction to the Jewish victims of the Nazi holocaust, to women, blacks, homosexuals, convicts, exiles, and the terminally ill, the minorities of our culture who write precisely because of their lack of other
kinds of power and their need to be heard. . . . For minorities, the dominant society establishes the norms by which they are rejected and which they, in turn, reject. The very effort to articulate a self becomes an expression of spirit; it asserts the value of an individual life by creating its literary experience. (23)

It is regrettable that Iranian academics like Keshavarz who live and teach in the West and who seem to be familiar with “the value of an individual life” and the importance of objective literary and social criticism should unfairly judge and depreciate the works of their fellow Iranians. Nor should the articulation of self, “the expression of spirit,” be confined to what is comforting and positive. It is time to allow critics of Iranian society to voice their opinions without having to fear intimidation and judgment.

In her memoir, Nafisi recalls something she once told her students: “A great novel heightens your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil”’ (133). It remains for readers to determine which of the two authors, Nafisi or Keshavarz, has endeavoured to portray a more balanced, less biased view of herself and her native country. Paying close attention to the events covered and the images projected in each narrative, it is not hard to see why \textit{Jasmine and Stars} has resonated with some Iranians. As Iranians, we are profoundly concerned with how we are viewed by others. As well, under the sensitive political circumstances and with all the negative propaganda that is being perpetuated against Iran, most of us understandably wish to avoid gratuitously enhancing the falsely sinister picture of ourselves that prevails in the West. But we must not sacrifice the capacity for critique. Despite this desire to counteract what some call the New Orientalist discourse, it is critical that we present all sides of our country boldly and truthfully.

\section*{Notes}

1 “Aiyneh chon aks-e to benmud rast / khod shekan, aiyneh shekastan khatast,” from \textit{Makhzan-ol Asrar (The Treasury of Mysteries)}; the translation is one on which poet E. D. Blodgett and I collaborated. Nezami Ganjavi, a twelfth-century poet, stands as one of the most influential figures in Persian literature.

2 In this version of the story, an elephant is brought to a town the people of which have never seen an elephant. During the night, several townspeople examine the creature and, depending on the body part that each person touches, each describes it differently: one who touches the elephant’s foot describes the animal as a “big, thick column”; another
insists that its trunk is a “drain pipe”; yet another individual describes its ear as a “large fan” (Keshavarz 1). While the story does caution against drawing conclusions on the basis of incomplete information, as an analogy, it also assumes that a culture is ultimately as simple as an elephant.

3 A Sufi’s quest for proximity to the Beloved (God), which involves inward transformation, consists of various states and stations. William Chittick, in *The Sufi Path of Love*, describes the stations as “the spiritual and moral perfections, or the ‘virtues’ achieved by the traveler” and the states as “the spiritual graces bestowed directly by God and outside of man’s power of acquisition” (12).

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