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Kitap İncelemesi/ Book Review

Representing Post-Revolutionary Iran

Hossein Nazari, Representing Post-Revolutionary Iran (Captivity, Neo-Orientalism, and Resistance in Iranian-American Life Writing), London: I. B. Tauris (Bloomsbury Publishing), 2022, 232 pages, ISBN: 9780755617371

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Over the last four decades, Iran has been one of the main areas of interest not only in the global political and strategic agenda but also in the cultural sphere. Most of these interests focus on the analysis of the domestic political and economic situation in addition to the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. However, there is a lack of studies that analyze the Iranian diaspora and its culture, lifestyle, and sentiments in a comparative manner. A remarkable attempt to fill this gap in the literature is the book *Representing Post-Revolutionary Iran: Captivity, Neo-Orientalism, and Resistance in Iranian-American Life Writing*, written and published a couple of months ago by Hossein Nazari, an assistant professor at the University of Tehran.

Mainly studying orientalism, diaspora studies, and literary criticism, Nazari elaborates on a very interesting and under-researched phenomenon in his book: What individual or sociocultural factors and motivations drive the Iranian-American diaspora women to write “memoirs” about the situation in the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran?

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In the first chapter, the author reviews the main concepts and general background of the research: a discussion on the perceptions of Iran in the Western imagination from ancient times till the 1979 Revolution and the current Iranian-Western [one could describe this as the Iran-US] conflict. Nazari puts a special emphasis on Said's famous and well-known *Orientalist* paradigm and its elaboration while discussing these memoirs and their so-called "cultural framework and background."

He particularly follows the path of the Iran-US relations and highlights the increase in the quantity and content of these memoirs which—he argues—aims at legitimizing the aggressive US attitude and hostilities toward Iran following the 1979 Revolution and political tensions (e.g., the rhetoric of "axis of evil" and nuclear negotiations process). Nazari finds interesting this increase in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks instead of very few memoirs or Iranian-American literature in comparison to the previous two decades (pp. 12-15). Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, new Orientalism, and auto-Orientalism are the main concepts that the author mobilizes to justify his arguments in labeling these texts as a product of the Orientalist discourse serving the US political agenda regarding the Middle East and, in particular, Iran. To this end, Nazari selects three volumes among those memoirs to discuss his arguments in detail: Betty Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), and Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading Beyond Lolita in Tehran* (2007).

The following chapters elaborate on these three memoirs respectively in a detailed manner and discuss their language depiction style, content, and publishing time to strengthen his arguments. The second chapter describes Mahmoody's the *New York Times* bestseller as "the mother of neo-Orientalist bestsellers" and highlights the main negating elements—such as captivity, veil and the status of women, civilizational differences, colonial discourse, corruption, and brutal/filthy/scheming/violent/hostile/lazy/eager-to-kill/animal-like image of the Iranian people, etc.—used to represent Iran as the "other" to the international community. Nazari also criticizes Mahmoody's "hyphenated identity" to represent Iranian-American literature as a US-born lady married to an Iranian doctor who lived for only two years in Iran (p. 30).

The third chapter focuses on Nafisi's book and begins with the famous Iranian scholar Prof. Hamid Dabashi's commentary on her image and identity: "If Edward Said dismantled the edifice of Orientalism, Azar Nafisi is recruited to re-accredit it" (p. 82). In the light of this statement and detailed content analysis, Nazari describes Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a "comeback and rebirth of Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter*" and another neo-Orientalist text published in the post-9/11 climate (p. 83). But he also notes that compared to Mahmoody's famous propagandistic memoir, Nafisi's book is distinguished by a native/insider element that provides authenticity and more truth to the narrative.

In the fourth chapter, Nazari clearly praises the last text, Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars* as the most significant memoir among the three volumes, diverging both from the former books' neo-Orientalist discourse and simultaneously seeking to subvert their language and narrative (p. 28). He also highlights Keshavarz's memoir as qualifying by a confluence of the academic, the personal, and the literary enriched with texts from Persian literature and an academic perspective to contrary Mahmoody's memoir.

The last chapter of Nazari's book can be summarized with his following evaluation regarding the general circumstances of the publishing years and so-called 'motivation' of the three books: "Investigating the representations of Iran, especially Iranian womanhood, in the first two texts (Mahmoody's and Nafisi's memoirs) revealed how such representation operate within the framework of an Orientalist episteme apropos Iran, and how they can be co-opted for promoting certain interventionist agendas in the so-called Muslim World" (p. 189). Besides, he questions the alignment of Nafisi's idea of the "liberation of Iranian woman" with those of neoconservative clique in the US, the close working relationship between herself and the US policymakers, and propagandistic discourse of Mahmoody and Nafisi also differing from their subsequent books.

To sum up, as a careful observer of modern Iranian literature and diaspora studies, Nazari skillfully addresses the influence of neo-Orientalist discourse reflected in Iranian-American literature, notably in memoirs. Yet, these kinds of comparative studies need to be strengthened with more examples to justify further the arguments for labeling the authors as "neo-Orientalist." Because the members of the Middle Eastern diaspora may criticize their own governments or regimes with very simple humanitarian

or democratic arguments as well; this stance not necessarily has to be “neo-Orientalist” in itself as the author and similar scholars suggest. Nevertheless, enriched with Said and Dabashi’s well-known Orientalist and neo-Orientalist conceptual framework, Nazari’s work provides a fruitful introductory guide for the reading and discussing of diaspora literature. The fluent language of the book and pursuant comparison and exemplification style also make the text easy to read. The book, thus, is recommended for readers and researchers on post-revolutionary Iranian politics and cultural studies along with diaspora studies.