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ESSAY

Beyond the Burka



Lynsey Addario

By LORRAINE ADAMS
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The veiled, oppressed Muslim woman has become overexposed. American book clubs consume her memoirs. Novels about her, as long as they are bleak, appear in the windows of our bookstores. Intellectuals argue over how she should be described and who can save her.

Yet the nations of her birth — with which we make war or wage fraught diplomacy as we contemplate invasion — remain behind another sort of veil. Many Americans fail to understand that Muslims can be Arab, African or Asian, not to mention European or American. They forget that Muslims may write in Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, Dari, Pashto, Chinese, Indonesian, Malay and a host of other languages, including Farsi, another name for Persian, the language of Iran. Lost too is the full spectrum of Islam in the lives of authors and their characters. There are secular Muslims, culturally influenced but non-practicing; moderate Muslims, practicing but tolerant; and radical fundamentalists, murderous and anti-Western. But one generalization holds true: much of contemporary Muslim literature remains unpublished in English translation.

The burka effect is a habit of mind neither unique to Islam nor new. [Virginia Woolf](#) described it in 1925 when she wrote about British views of the exotic territory known as American letters: “Excursions into the literature of a foreign country much resemble our travels abroad. Sights that are taken for granted by the inhabitants seem to us astonishing. ... In our desire to get at the heart of the country we seek out whatever it may be that is most unlike what we are used to, and declare this to be the very essence.”

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Today there are also practical reasons that our perceptions of Muslim literature remain distorted. Literature in translation, regardless of its origin, has trouble finding American publishers. The languages of Islam, unlike European languages, particularly French and Spanish, are not often spoken or read by American editors. "When you have a book proposal, you have to have at least two chapters and a synopsis in English," explained Nahid Mozaffari, an Iranian historian who edited "Strange Times, My Dear," a 2005 PEN anthology of contemporary Iranian literature. "But there's no money to pay for translation. A lot of what's happening is nostalgic exiles or academics ... doing the chapter and synopsis in their spare time. Not all of them are good writers, and a lot has been killed by bad translation."

These days, the Muslim memoirs and fiction that reach Americans are often written by exiles or the children of immigrants, and are usually written in English or a European language. Consider, for example, "Infidel," the recent best-selling memoir of the Somali-born Dutch émigrée Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Perhaps it is not much of a surprise that with this one book, the pro-American, publicity-friendly, post-9/11 Hirsi Ali has attracted more news coverage, reviews and readers than the America-ambivalent, pre-9/11 Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi, who has been confronting the same issues — clitoridectomy, child marriage, stoning — in novels and memoirs since the late 1950s. Saadawi, who fought prejudice to earn a medical degree in Cairo, crusaded for health care in rural villages and lost government jobs after she spoke out against the oppression of women, was imprisoned by [Anwar Sadat](#) in 1981. Her name appeared on fundamentalist death lists a decade later. She has faced these trials and others without much public support or public outcry from the West. But Hirsi Ali — whose book appeared after the murder of her collaborator, the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, forced her into hiding — has received major attention from the world's press and a post as a resident fellow from the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. Saadawi's work has been translated mainly by small British publishers, with little promotional muscle and modest sales.

The blockbuster factor clearly shapes the translation market. Like Hollywood producers, book publishers want to duplicate a proven formula for success. The aftereffects of the Iranian emigrée Azar Nafisi's best-selling 2003 memoir, "Reading Lolita in Tehran," which focused on a closeted female book club studying Western literature after the 1979 revolution, offer an interesting case in point.

The years since Nafisi's book appeared have seen the American publication of a host of women's memoirs of Iran: Afschineh Latifi's "Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran"; Roya Hakakian's "Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran"; Nahid Rachlin's "Persian Girls"; Azadeh Moaveni's "Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran"; and the graphic memoirs of Marjane Satrapi, "Persepolis" and "Persepolis 2." This year alone has seen the publication of novels by the Iranian-American Porochista Khakpour ("Sons and Other Flammable Objects") and Dalia Sofer (who depicts a Jewish Iranian family and their Muslim neighbors in "The Septembers of Shiraz").

Many of these works are serious literary endeavors. Yet because they concern the events of decades past — most notably the overthrow of the American-backed shah and the ascent of the Islamic theocracy — they divert readers' attention from the complexity and contradictions of present-day Iran. All too often, the images Americans associate with that country are those of social horrors: forced childhood marriages, domestic abuse and stoning for adultery, flogging for wearing Western dress and underground sexual adventures accompanied by banned alcoholic beverages.

"What people have been eager to publish are the very darkest views; they skip the rich and nuanced humanist views," observed Zara Houshmand, a poet and playwright who was a co-author of the Iranian artist Monir Farmanfarman's memoir, "A Mirror Garden," published here last year. "Partly it's because Western journalists — but also the Iranians who have been in a position to write in the West — haven't seen that much of the country. They stick to North Tehran. North Tehran is like writing only about the Upper East Side

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and saying you're capturing the American experience." Farmanfarmaian's book begins in 1924 in the ancient northern city of Qazvin and details the life of an imaginative iconoclast. Perhaps the most important exception to the rule is the Nobel Peace Prize winner [Shirin Ebadi](#)'s 2006 memoir, "Iran Awakening," a nuanced account of this brave Iranian's life.

"There are many ways for Iranians and Americans to have a cross-cultural understanding," Ramin Jahanbegloo explained in an e-mail message. The author of many books, including "Conversations With [Isaiah Berlin](#)," Jahanbegloo has been the host at conferences that introduced Indian, European and North American intellectuals to Iran. Held in solitary confinement at Evin prison in Tehran for four months in 2006, he now teaches at the University of Toronto.

"Listening to the story of Iranian women is only one way of engaging this dialogue," Jahanbegloo noted. "But the stories of many other sociological actors of Iranian society remain untold. I think the opinion of the American public on Iranians and on their ways of thinking is still incomplete, and, if I may say, immature. Iran is a complex and paradoxical country."

Traveling last year in Mashad, Tabriz, Abadan, Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd, I found books by many Iranian writers, unknown here, whose work focuses on the more complicated, less polemical existence of the Iranian people. Among them was Zoya Pirzad, who, in the way of [Cormac McCarthy](#) or Annie Proulx, writes literary works that occasionally turn up on her country's best-seller lists. At the time I was in Iran, both the hardcover edition of her novel "We Get Used to It" and the paperback of "I'll Turn Off the Lights" were circulating widely. An Iranian of Armenian descent, Pirzad has also written about the Iran-Iraq war, the eight-year struggle, ending in 1988, that claimed more than a million lives on both sides. To Americans, that conflict is all but forgotten, yet it haunts much of contemporary Iranian fiction.

I also found the work of Goli Taraghi, well known in Iran for her evocations of childhood. Her most recent novel, "The Return," has not been published here. (The University of Texas Press published a translation of her story collection, "A Mansion in the Sky," in 2003.) Another prominent Iranian writer, Moniru Ravanipur, comes from southern Iran, the region most heavily Arab-influenced. Not surprisingly, her fiction draws from the mythology of the Persian Gulf and village life along the coast; her most recent novels, "Nazlie" and "Heart of Steel," are unavailable in English.

Great work by Iranian writers — both male and female — is sometimes difficult to find in both Iran and the United States. Shahrnush Parsipur worked against the shah but grew disenchanted with the 1979 revolution. "Women Without Men," her Calvinesque novel of five women — among them a prostitute — gathering in an allegorical garden in contemporary Iran, led to her imprisonment in the late 1980s. This was followed by "Touba and the Meaning of Night," a novel that describes historical forces most American readers will find unfamiliar — British and Russian colonialism in Iran, the reigns of two shahs, the [C.I.A.](#)-backed overthrow of the democratically elected Mohammed Mossadegh in the 1950s — that are nevertheless pertinent to Iran's relationship with the United States and our Western allies. The Feminist Press published translations of "Touba" and "Women Without Men," yet Parsipur's more recent works are unavailable here. Many are also banned in Iran.

Sometimes Muslim women attract Western attention less for their literary efforts than for how they can be considered in a larger political debate. For [Paul Berman](#), [Ian Buruma](#)'s depiction of Hirsi Ali in his book "Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance" was an important example of the way certain Europeans fail to be sufficiently vigilant about Islamic cruelty to women. Last June, The New Republic published a long essay by Berman that created bitter feuds here and in Europe, with intellectuals (mostly male) competing to claim that they were the most critical of Islam's treatment of women.

In 2006, Azar Nafisi was caught in a similar literary skirmish when the Columbia professor Hamid Dabashi was featured in an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, drawing attention to his denunciation of her — in the Egyptian newspaper Al Ahram and the Web site of Z magazine — as a pawn of pro-war American neocons. Nafisi has written a public denial, rejecting the notion that she is a supporter of regime change in Iran. Some critics object to the suggestion implicit in “Reading Lolita in Tehran” that exposure to Western, not Iranian, novelists is a cure for Islamic tyranny, and Nafisi answers them by countering that she has tried to help Iranian authors find American publishers.

The story of Muslim literature in translation — and particularly of Muslim literature by and about women — has many footnotes. “Girls of Riyadh,” a novel written in Arabic by Rajaa Alsanea, a young Saudi now studying dentistry in Chicago, caused a sensation in her native country, but its English translation, published here last summer, reads more like chick lit. “The best writers tend toward disturbance, and that asks the most of any reader,” I was told by Dedi Felman, a book editor in New York and an editor of Words Without Borders, an Internet magazine that publishes literature in translation. Its first three issues contained work from Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the countries that made up the so-called “axis of evil” in George Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address. “In essence,” Felman explained, “we are asking people to recognize the Other not for what they want it to be or anticipate it to be, but for what it is. And as with all attempts to negotiate divides, that is neither an easy nor a simple place in which to put oneself.”

Lorraine Adams, a writer in residence at Eugene Lang College at the New School, is the author of a novel, “Harbor.”

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