Air-conditioned transportation in Tehran is notoriously difficult to find. For pampered visitors such as the cultural anthropologists and documentary filmmakers from New York and Los Angeles who seem to converge on the Iranian capital every summer, a cool taxi ride to the northern parts of town recalls something of the charmed life they left behind in the United States, a life some refer to offhandedly as “the grid.”

Being on the grid, it seems, is something akin to having a non-Iranian passport or a green card, multiple credit cards loaded with debt, a laptop with a 24-hour DSL connection, satellite television in an air-filtered apartment, impeccably pedicured feet in open-toe sandals, a single Gauloise cigarette ashing in a saucer next to that daily injection of coffee and money earned from a steady job. This is not to say that some of these components of the grid are not available in Tehran. They are. Apartment complexes in the northern parts of town, like Shahrak-e Qarb, also provide residents with hilly, green outdoor spaces where a woman can walk her dog without the government-prescribed full body covering and headscarf. Such private complexes come with in-house supermarkets, boxed meals delivered to your door and a doorman who will call a taxi and announce visitors just as he might at a one-bedroom pad in New York. In Tehran, all this comes to about $500 a month.

In our time of total war, however, Tehran visitors’ moniker for the good life also evokes the frightening world of intelligence gathering networks and terrorists recently fictionalized in the TNT miniseries The Grid. In this terrifying world, some of those visitors, wittingly or no, have acted to embed the particulars of Iranian cultural and social life — particularly those related to Iranian women — into visions for Iran’s future that are generated in a grid entirely different from their matrix of material comforts. It cannot be coincidental that the memoirs by Iranian female authors now living in the West, such as those of Firoozeh Dumas, Marjaneh Satrapi and Azar Nafisi, have found such phenomenal commercial success at a time when Washington hawks would like these authors’ country of birth to be the next battleground in the total war of the
Freedom at What Cost

It is entry into the grid — in both of the above senses of the term — that best describes Firoozeh Dumas’s memoir, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. Upon her family’s arrival in America in 1972, the young Firoozeh and her mother discover that Firoozeh’s father, an engineer who had studied in the US some years earlier, has no useful knowledge of the English language except for the vocabulary he had needed to read pre-World War II textbooks. Her mother eventually teaches herself how to ask about the prices of everyday necessities and kitchen appliances by watching “The Price Is Right” on television.

Fifteen times, Dumas counts, the family visits Disneyland, but as is typical of Iranian cultural patterns, these outings were enjoyed in a tribal fashion. On several occasions, her father brings along his Iranian colleagues and their families, sometimes six families in all. The grid is, within months of her family’s arrival, being adapted to old habits of a life lived elsewhere. The family celebrates Thanksgiving with turkey and stuffing, but the pumpkin pie is served with Persian ice cream made with “chunks of cream, pistachios and aromatic cardamom.” Dumas’ recollections of Thanksgiving dessert prompt this insight into world politics: “I believe peace in the Middle East could be achieved if the various leaders held their discussions in front of a giant bowl of Persian ice cream, each leader with his own silver spoon. Political differences would melt with every mouthful.” (75) Sensuality and utopian hope do not alleviate the sophomoric imagery in this vision of change: What fools, what diplomatic failures, the reader must imagine the political leaders of this region to be!

Dumas’ family gives thanks around the holiday dinner table for their new life in a free country where one can pursue one’s hopes and dreams — even if one is female. But while, for Dumas, freedom certainly entails such essential rights as the right to vote, it “also refers to the abundance of samples available throughout this great land.” True to her naive view of Middle East diplomacy, she contrasts this abundance with the environment she left behind in Iran. “Here, a person can taste something, not buy, and still have the clerk wish him a nice day.” (75) Few living in the Islamic Republic today would see the widespread practice of communal hospitality known as *nasri* as somehow less free than Dumas’ sampling. For Dumas, it would seem, freedom in America is the endless possibility of self-indulgence understood without any self-reflection. This is freedom, yes, but at what cost? Total war? Occupation? Perhaps.

“Today Iraq”

Driving north on the Sadr freeway in Tehran in the summer of 2004, I came across a series of images covering the soundproofed walls of the opposite lane. The first panel from the left was a painted reproduction of the infamous photograph of the uniformed Pfc. Lynndie England holding a leash tied to the neck of an Iraqi prisoner who curls naked in a fetal position on the Abu Ghraib prison floor. This image sent shock waves around the world, as did the one reproduced in the second panel, a hooded Iraqi prisoner balancing on a platform with electrical wires attached to his limbs and genitals.
Such haunting images of humiliating torture reinforced for many the admonitions of Col. Mathieu in *The Battle of Algiers*, the famous film on guerrilla warfare now reportedly in vogue at the Pentagon. The colonel's words impressed on the audiences of the early 1960s, as they do to the global multitude today, that the continued presence of an imperial military where it is not wanted requires it to identify sources of populist agitation by any means necessary. An ordinary citizen’s support of the occupation, whether in the name of liberation or in the name of progress, implies his or her tacit acceptance of all the repercussions of military force, including torture.

Passing these reproductions of domination on the freeway, I was struck by the imprints of the hand that had transformed their texture from photographs into painted images. I was also struck by the words that were written in Farsi to one side of the second panel: “Emrooz Iraq.” “Today Iraq.” It is an auspicious caption that almost reads like an alert on a mobile phone: “This is Iraq today.” The third and fourth panels in the series represented the site of pilgrimage in Mecca and the shrine of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. A quotation attributed to Imam Ali appeared across the fourth image. It calls upon the believer to be the enemy of tyranny and a supporter of the victim of injustice. Following a gap on the wall, a final panel captured three soldiers on bended knee surrounded by smoke and fire in combat.

The last heavy combat Iranian soldiers saw was the vicious eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, for which Iran sacrificed the majority of its male labor force, men who would now be in their thirties, forties or early fifties. Seen from the perspective of that war, the messages communicated in the fusion of these five panels seemed ambiguous at best. The images arrived as both the bearers of the latest news — “Today Iraq” — and a prescription for pious living. “Be a force against evil and a defender of the good.” They carried both a reminder of a crucial duty for the devout and a powerful picture of military retaliation. They were a broken phrase, an unfinished visual exhortation to an end open to question.

There is little question, however, about the messages contained in images of female bodies in Islamic cultures circulated by the global media. Appearing in enlarged photos enveloped by small newsprint, unveiled women in hair salons enjoy a cut or a manicure. Shots of Afghan women walking the streets of Kabul without a shroud and Iranian women in tight, thigh-length overcoats and colorful headscarves made for Barbie on a camping trip decorate the pages of weekly newsmagazines. These images and their pointed captions speak, on the one hand, of the fruits of another US-led war effort and “the fall” of the Taliban regime. They show, on the other hand, a burgeoning scuffle for change — change conceived in terms of an imagined democracy in which women appear in the public sphere, relatively unfettered. This fantasy of Oriental women’s liberation by Western intervention, though centuries in the making, goes little further than the printed page. Liberals have called the images of liberated women’s bodies propaganda, though in a time of total war such as ours, one would not have expected otherwise.

**Marker of Modernity**

It is important to recall, before proceeding, that women’s bodies have long been politically charged symbols within Iran’s national history, not just in its relations with the West. The decision of Reza Shah, father of the Shah deposed before the Islamic Revolution, to mandate that Iranian women remove the veil in the 1930s was the culmination of one lengthy historical process
The *Shahnama*, a national epic that versifies the history of Iran from its beginnings until the Muslim conquest, for example, suggests a vital role played by women. Mahmoud Omidsalar argues that feminine symbols, indeed female figures, appear throughout this epic to “arbitrate all significant instances of transfer of power, be they royal, heroic or magical.”[1] Embodied at times in female literary and historical characters such as Faranak, Barmaya and the goddess Anahita, the female body stands at the birth of “all new orders” and reassuringly watches over moments of transitional trauma.

Reading the periodicals and records of the Iranian constitutional period (1905-1911) for the parliamentary debates that focused on the nation’s responsibility for the fate of Quchani women and girls captured or sold to the Turkomans, Afsaneh Najambadi suggests that gender may be considered a “uniquely structuring category” for the study of similar transitional moments. Though largely forgotten in subsequent renditions of events, the debates concerning the “daughters of Quchan” were pivotal to the consolidation of the Iranian parliament and for the constitution of Iran’s modern identity. Indeed, the term *vatan* defined a nation that was imagined as a community larger than the familial and the immediate and “inscribed...as a female body.”[2] In the chronicles, memoirs, modernist tracts and Iranian travel narratives of the nineteenth century onward, the female body as mother and as beloved became principally the metaphorical and ultimately the material battleground for the inscription of the nation. The female body was, in other words, a pivot in Iran’s historical transition to modernity.

Consider the unveiled body of the Babi poet Tahirih Qurrat al-Ayn (Fatemeh Baraghani), who appears in the chronicle of the nineteenth-century court historian, Muhammad Taqi Siphir, *Nasikh al-Tavarikh*. Siphir takes pleasure in an exaggerated description of the poet’s unveiled body, adorned, as he describes it, like a peacock of Paradise beckoning an audience of desiring men to “kiss those lips of hers which put to shame the ruby of Ramman, and rub their faces against her breasts, which chagrined the pomegranates of the garden.”[3] The unveiled woman poet is represented in the chronicle as the object-cause of national desire, a desire that is then condemned by the force of the law in such a way that the national subject is hailed to destroy it. Reading this and other nineteenth-century narratives hermeneutically, it is impossible to pin down what her particular encroachment on the nation is about. But in the subsequent recollection of the image of this prototypical Babi in the next eight decades, it is clear that “the Babi” is indistinguishable from the modern Iranian subject itself.

Women’s associations founded in the decades after the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 began publishing newspaper and journal articles in which they addressed unveiling as a symbol of modernity. Later, in the 1930s, Reza Shah’s stringent unveiling policies saw veiling as a marker of national backwardness and a measure of women’s social retardation. The enforcement of new unveiling laws sparked many debates about women’s education, progress and women’s role in the constitution of Iran as a modern nation. The Babi as an unveiled female body was recovered again and again in the public and private documents of this era as a threat to the very constitution of the Iranian nation and, paradoxically, as the marker of its emerging modernity. What was at stake, it would seem, is the concept of namus (honor) “which shifted in this period between the idea of purity of woman (‘ismat) and integrity of the nation.”[4] Until at least the first decade of the
The generation of largely upper-class, urban, educated female writers who were born before the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 are the inheritors of this history. For them, the compulsory veiling instituted by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his clerical regime became a key means of illustrating the broader social and political tensions unleashed by the revolution. One simple panel in the Paris-based Iranian artist and writer Marjaneh Satrapi’s “graphic memoir,” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, stands out as a forceful representation of this moment of transition and the “cultural revolution” that began to assume its full force right before the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988.

On the left of the panel, four women, shrouded in black veils, with eyes closed, open brows and two arms raised in the air, recite the words: “The veil! The veil! The veil!” On the right, facing them, four women, eyes wide open, brows slanting downward in anger, raise their arms to the words, “Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!” Satrapi’s caption to this panel reads: “Everywhere in the streets there were demonstrations for and against the veil.” (5)

None of the brows on Satrapi’s characters are unfurrowed after this point, with the exception of the panels in which she draws her young schoolmates playing with the winter hoods they were asked to knit for Iranian soldiers (97) or again, when she depicts the girls giggling about the flatulence factor of canned beans sitting on an empty shelf in a Tehran supermarket during the war. (92) The eyebrows disappear entirely on the faces of young Marji and her veiled female friends when they make eye contact with young men in an upscale hamburger joint called Kansas. (112) Throughout the book, the furrowed brows of her characters signal tension and uncertain transition. They are witnesses to strife.

The *hejab* (Islamic dress), made mandatory in the new Islamic Republic to counter, however nominally, the Western cultural impulses associated with the former Pahlavi regime, and to protect and preserve the purity of Iranian women, is described in the biographical texts of Satrapi and Azar Nafisi as “stifling” and “unnatural.” In their works, the Iranian *chador* (a black, full-length veil) appears as a new historical marker that would distinguish the ideological position of “the fundamentalist woman” from the position of a woman who stands in opposition to the newly established Islamic regime.

Another panel in Satrapi’s graphic memoir emphasizes the ambivalence many Iranians felt about the social change that immediately preceded the Iran-Iraq war. Indoors, behind a curtained window, a young girl named Marji who represents the narrator stands between her mother and father, looking out onto the street. Together, they watch a bearded man pass by in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, with his wife, in a full *chador*, holding her young son by the hand. Before the window, looking out, Marji’s father is drawn with a mustache. His wife, standing slightly bent over, as if despondent, is dressed in a tight-fitting top and a checkered skirt. She speaks the words that are seemingly on the minds of the other members of the family: “Look at her! Last year she was wearing a miniskirt, showing off her beefy thighs to the whole neighborhood. And now
Madame is wearing a chador. It suits her better, I guess.” (75) These images are images of struggle, embodied as principled positions in a war against two distinct regimes. They are capsules in ink and paper of a particular time and place.

The numerous memoirs and biographies written since the 1979 revolution are sprinkled with notations on female adornment — alluding to everything from the mandatory head covering to prohibitions on nail polish and lipstick. If these references appear superficial and at times repetitive, their constant presence gets at the crucial question that has dominated Iranian politics since the nineteenth century. That question, simply put, asks, “Whose nation is this?” For the women writers, this is a historical question, one that surfaces from bearing witness to a nation’s transformation. It stems from the recognition that one’s own body — a female body — is a fundamental constitutive force in the coming into being of a new era in national history. The question is localized in that it asks, “What effects do the things that I embody bring about in this nation today?”

**Generational Differences**

The memoir of Johns Hopkins University professor Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which had spent 36 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list as of mid-September 2004, engages this question directly. Nafisi acknowledges in the book that her return to Iran to teach literature during the post-revolutionary period meant that, by virtue of her gender, she would be at the center of politics. Her book, in this sense, follows the trajectory of literature that bears witness to the processes of change during the revolution and the first years of the Islamic Republic. She shows the ways in which the female body plays a pivotal and assertive role in the formation of the new.

Describing a city battered by war, she writes about the students who attended her classes during the 1980s and early 1990s to read “the great books” of the Western canon, including novels by Jane Austen, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Vladimir Nabokov. Her goal of describing how her female students, sitting in the private study circle that she founded in 1995, identify their own plight with the plights of Lolita and Elizabeth Bennet is enough to capture one’s interest. The writing, too, is gripping. Each of Nafisi’s characters “glows on the page,” one reviewer writes, “illuminated by Nafisi’s affection.” Most reviews of the book in the US press are comparably fervent and enthusiastic. “*Reading Lolita in Tehran* had a most unusual effect on me,” writes another reviewer. “I didn’t want to be interrupted, so I canceled a dental appointment and a business lunch and missed a deadline. I read and read and ignored the world. This is what brilliant books will do; they seize you until the story is over.”

As Nafisi herself told the *New York Times*, however, “People from my country have said the book was successful because of a Zionist conspiracy and US imperialism, and others have criticized me for washing our dirty laundry in front of the enemy.” These are certainly unsettling responses to a book that by all accounts deserves praise for its style, complexity and all-consuming efficacy. But how is one to interpret such accusations?

Though some of Nafisi’s study circle participants are children of the revolution, there is a sense in which *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a witness to a period that has passed. As one of Mahnaz
Kousha’s female informants in *Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women* explained in a series of interviews conducted between 1995 and 1997: “The younger generation (born after 1979) is going to be the agent of change. From the very beginning when they opened their eyes they saw that women demonstrated on television. It is correct that all those demonstrators wore black chadors. What is more important is that they were all women, demanding something. This generation has seen women playing an active role and has accepted that. Veiling is not a problem for those children who were raised with it. It is not going to stop them. I believe a piece of material is not going to stop women’s progress.” [5] Kousha’s informant underscores the ability of younger women to demand and bring about social change regardless of what the outside world perceives as insurmountable restrictions. What was encumbering and unnatural to Nafisi’s pre-revolutionary generation is now unremarkable to many, if not all, of the generation that has grown up knowing nothing but the mandatory veil. The emphatic outrage over the circumstances of women when Islamic rule was freshly established has become almost mute.

“When we had this secret class in Tehran,” Nafisi told the *Washington Post* in December 2003, “we felt utterly helpless.” But not all Iranian women feel helpless after the limited openings for social and political activism offered by the period of Khatami’s presidency, and indeed Nafisi is hardly unaware of the powerful presence of women in Iranian society today. Of the Nobel Prize-winning women’s rights activist and human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi, she wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “As a woman activist she did not have to look to other countries for role models: She could rely on the tradition created by many courageous Iranian women before her, who, for over a century, had fought despotism, opening political, cultural and social spaces for Iranian women.” In the same interview with the *Washington Post*, she said of women living in Iran, “They are persistent. This is bigger than politics. These women just refuse to give up.”

**Total War**

Moreover, it seems undeniable that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and its author have been promoted, at least in part, to fulfill the ends of total war. Although human rights violations are an ongoing and urgent concern in the era of President Mohammad Khatami, whose government came to power by democratic election in 1997, after the point at which Nafisi’s book ends, the restoration of such rights is not the driving force of the total war in which Nafisi’s book has been embedded.

Former Marine Adam Mersereau explains the concept of total war in the *National Review*. It is a war “that not only destroys the enemy’s military forces, but also brings the enemy society to an extremely personal point of decision, so that they are willing to accept a reversal of the cultural trends that spawned the war in the first place.” While a total war strategy does not have to “include the intentional targeting of civilians,” sparing them “cannot be its first priority. The purpose of total war is to permanently force your will onto another people.” The purpose of the total war that is the US-led “war on terror” is to force “the grid” onto a culture that is, at its best and at its worst, ambivalent to it.

For some time before and after the publication of her runaway bestseller, Nafisi was being promoted alongside proponents of total war by Benador Associates, which arranges their TV appearances and speaking engagements and helps to place their articles in the top newspapers. Such neo-conservative luminaries as Richard Perle and James Woolsey, who notoriously referred
to the war on terror as “World War IV,” are still clients of the agency. In September, their agent
Eleana Benador traced the cognitive links the neo-conservatives draw between the war and
Middle Eastern women in a posting “From Eleana’s Desk” on the agency’s website: “One of the
most memorable experiences [of the 2004 Athens Olympics] was to watch the Afghan woman
participating in one of the races, as well as an Iraqi woman. They didn’t go far, they were among
the last ones. But, watching them, I couldn’t avoid thinking: ‘We are winning!’ Yes, we are winning
over extremism, whether religious or secular. More accurately, we are starting to win. The road
ahead is still a long one, but the beginning is already giving results. We have rescued from the
hands of those extremists these women who have regained their status as human beings, and who
are learning now what it is to be treated with respect and dignity.”

In Nafisi’s acknowledgements, finally, Princeton University emeritus historian Bernard Lewis is
thanked as one “who opened the door.” Though one would hope that she testifies here to the
gentleman’s chivalry and good breeding, one fears that there is more to it. Lewis is the eminent
theorist of civilizational decline in the Islamic world who has reportedly briefed Dick Cheney.
Books like his own bestseller *What Went Wrong?* (2002) are the ahistorical scaffolding upon which
the neo-conservative hard core of Perle and Woolsey hang their policy prescriptions. Take, for
example, this statement by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a leading neo-
conservative inside government: “Bernard Lewis has brilliantly placed the relationships and the
issues of the Middle East into their larger context, with truly objective, original and always
independent thought. Bernard has taught [us] how to understand the complex and important
history of the Middle East and use it to guide us where we will go next to build a better world for
generations to come.” But what does this complex and important history amount to? As
University of Michigan history professor Juan Cole observes in a generous review of Lewis’ book,
“[Lewis] is not writing analytical history here, with a view to explaining particular problems by
isolating independent variables. He is writing moral history, which is tautological. He seems to
insist on erasing any successes [Muslims] have had, and to imply that the Muslims have failed
because they are failures.” [6] Failures.

**Milk Anger**

After my return from Tehran in the summer, I received a photograph of the panels I had seen on
the Sadr freeway. The fifth of the six panels had gone up to fill the gap on the wall. There are two
men in it. One is laying face down on a red carpet, and the other, sitting next to him, looks out of
the frame toward the sixth panel depicting the three men engaged in military combat. The
caption on the left side of the fifth panel reads: “Dirooz Filistin.” Yesterday Palestine.

While the messages and meanings of the images of torture in US jails in Iraq are being muted in
the global media with visual rhetoric that justifies the occupation, and does so by promoting
images of women’s bodies that have been liberated in hair salons, the Iranian government is
promoting images of prison tortures toward different ends. These images of humiliating violence
in US-occupied Iraq are hung in close proximity to images that remind the viewer of the
inequities of Israeli occupation in Palestine.

It is likely, to my mind, that Nafisi’s efforts converge on a will to institute a transnational feminist
ethics that is concerned with the lives and conditions of women elsewhere. But if this is so, a
consistently ahistorical analysis of Iran — one that does not distinguish between past and present — cannot be the rallying call for efforts on behalf of Iranian women today. In the era of total war intent on the reversal of cultural trends through external force, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a representation of the state of current affairs is an undiscriminating gesture. It performs like a wound-up metal monkey on wheels as the warmup act for more theater of unprovoked war and another occupation.

A transnational feminist practice intent on the Middle East is better served by focusing on the question that has long kept the region so distraught, and that has contributed to a *colere du lait* (milk anger) that, like milk, boils into sudden rage when heated. This question is the question of occupation. Modifications in the status of women in relation to the nation-state are handled more ably by internal forces of change. That is the judgment of history and a judgment in ethics.

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**Endnotes**


“Learning in our family was entirely self-directed,” she writes in her memoir, “Educated,” which enters the hardcover nonfiction list at No. 3. “You could learn anything you could teach yourself, after your work was done.” And so Westover — who knew she wanted to leave the mountainside, where she suffered at the hands of an abusive brother — taught herself the subjects she needed to learn to take the ACT. The gaps in her knowledge were enormous: In college, she once raised her hand in class and asked a professor what the Holocaust was. To write “Educated,” Westover had to teach herself all over again. “I read a handful of memoirs to get a sense of what the genre meant,” she says. “I needed to learn the fundamentals of the craft. I had never written a word of narrative.”