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Gendered Diasporic Legibility: Iranian American Women Writers and the Politics of Self-Presentation

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Abstract

*This article argues that Iranian American women writers—such as Marjane Satrapi, Azadeh Moaveni, Roya Hakakian, Porochista Khakpour, Firoozeh Dumas, Dalia Sofer, and Laleh Khadivi—construct what this paper calls gendered diasporic legibility, a mode of self-representation designed to render Iranian women legible to Western liberal audiences in ways that conform to existing discursive expectations. Building on Nima Naghibi’s critique of Western feminist rescue narratives, Amy Motlagh’s work on Iranian American life writing, Evelyn Alsultany’s analysis of post-9/11 racialization, and Sara Ahmed’s theories of affect and recognition, this article argues that Iranian American women’s literature is shaped by a persistent tension: the need to counter Orientalist misrepresentations while simultaneously navigating a literary marketplace that demands feminized narratives of oppression, liberation, or gratitude. Through close readings of *Persepolis*, *Lipstick Jihad*, *Journey from the Land of No*, *Funny in Farsi*, *The Septembers of Shiraz*, *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*, and *The Age of Orphans*, the article shows that Iranian American women writers must often perform an accessible feminist modernity in order to be heard at all. This performance creates a paradox: in resisting Orientalism, these texts become entangled in the very structures of visibility and consumption they seek to challenge. The article concludes that gender operates not merely as a thematic concern but as the primary mechanism through which diasporic Iranian subjectivity becomes intelligible—and thus publishable—within American cultural and political discourse.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Iranian American literature has grown significantly since the early 2000s, propelled in large part by the works of women writers whose

memoirs, novels, and graphic narratives have shaped American understanding of Iranian identity. While these works vary widely in style and political orientation, they share a common

preoccupation: how to represent Iranian womanhood in a cultural landscape shaped by Orientalism, post-revolutionary geopolitics, and post-9/11 racialization. Recent scholarship has further shown that this representational burden is inseparable from the racialization of Iranian Americans in the United States. Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi demonstrate that Iranian American writers frequently turn to African American literary traditions—especially Baldwin’s discourse on racial subjectivity—to articulate their own racialization and negotiate visibility within U.S. racial hierarchies (75). Iranian American women’s stories circulate in a U.S. public sphere that is primed to interpret images of Iranian women as symbols of either oppression or liberation. Because of this expectation, Iranian American women writers must negotiate forms of visibility that are deeply gendered. Their self-representations are not neutral; rather, they are shaped by what the West is prepared to recognize as “authentic,” “feminist,” or “liberatory.”

This paper contends that Iranian American women’s literature constructs what I call gendered diasporic legibility—a representational mode through which diasporic subjects fashion themselves as intelligible to Western audiences by performing recognizable forms of femininity. Gendered diasporic legibility emerges in narratives that present Iranian women as agents of feminist critique while simultaneously framing their stories in ways that resonate with Western liberal sensibilities. This often includes the performance of self-disclosure, emotional vulnerability, cultural mediation, and the articulation of trauma concerning Iranian patriarchy or state repression. At the same time, these narratives must negotiate the racialization of Middle Eastern identities in the United States, particularly following the 1979 hostage crisis and the attacks of September 11, 2001. This economy of legibility ensures that only certain affective registers—trauma, victimization, and political suffering—are recognized as “authentic” Iranian female experience. This replicates older racialized publishing practices in the United States, where minority writers were permitted visibility only by conforming to reductive expectations of suffering or racial melodrama (Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez 117–18).

Drawing on key feminist and diaspora theorists, this paper shows how Iranian American literature becomes a site where gender is mobilized to negotiate visibility, acceptance, legitimacy, and resistance. I argue that while these writers often resist Orientalist tropes, the conditions of publication and reception in the United States nonetheless pressure them to perform a particular kind of gendered Iranian identity—one that is familiar, consumable, and aligned with Western expectations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: FEMINISM, DIASPORA, AND LEGIBILITY

Iranian American memoir and gendered visibility Persis M. Karim notes that Iranian American women’s memoirs have become the foundational genre of Iranian diaspora literature (“Writing Iranian Americans”). Because memoir foregrounds the voice of the self, it serves as a platform where Iranian women articulate identity, history, and political critique. Yet Karim also emphasizes that the dominance of memoir signals a demand for personal testimony from Iranian women—a demand that is inseparable from Western desires for intimate access to the private lives of Iranian subjects.

Amy Motlagh’s *Burying the Beloved* (2012) and her essay “Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing” (2008) similarly observe that Iranian American women’s life writing is shaped by the cultural politics of readership. Motlagh argues that life writing becomes a negotiation with Western audiences who expect Iranian women to serve as cultural translators, mediators, or witnesses to Iranian repression. These expectations shape what kinds of narratives get published and how they are framed. Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez also illustrate how this trend impacted previous generations of writers such as Hurston who “casts lights on the publishers refusal to publish anything that does not bespeak of a race tension, the Negro as a problem, rather than as a rich tapestry of internal feelings and motives which make him a complex being, deserving of respect” (Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez, 2024, p.117).

Nima Naghibi’s *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* critiques Western feminist discourses that imagine Middle Eastern women as needing

rescue from patriarchal cultures. According to Naghibi, this logic of “saving brown women from brown men” (a phrase borrowed from Spivak) shapes Western interpretations of Iranian women’s narratives. Iranian American writers must therefore navigate a literary field that valorizes stories of unveiling, empowerment, and escape.

Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* historicizes this dynamic, showing how colonial feminism has long relied on narratives of female oppression in Muslim societies to justify Western intervention. Iranian American women’s literature must contend with this deeply rooted structure of recognition. Safi Ullah’s study of *Tree Without Roots* demonstrates how women’s voices historically emerge through resistance to patriarchal control, a pattern that resonates with Iranian American women’s efforts to write against both Iranian state patriarchy and Western discursive constraints (Ullah 2019).

Post-9/11 racialization and the gendered Muslim subject

Evelyn Alsultany’s *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* identifies a new mode of “simplified complex representations” in which media portray Muslim women sympathetically while continuing to reproduce stereotypes. Iranian American women writers operate in the shadow of this paradigm: their legibility depends on demonstrating their liberal modernity while remaining tethered to tropes of Middle Eastern trauma.

Neda Maghbooleh’s *The Limits of Whiteness* shows how Iranians are racially positioned as white-by-law yet non-white-by-experience. For Iranian American women, this means that gender becomes a racializing attribute: as women, they are hyper visible; as Middle Eastern, they are suspect or exotic.

Affect, recognition, and feminist performance

Sara Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters and The Cultural Politics of Emotion* provide a theoretical lens for analyzing the affective structures of recognition. Ahmed argues that the immigrant becomes legible through emotions—fear, pity, gratitude, or shame—that circulate socially. Iranian American women writers must therefore manage emotional expectations: their narratives

cannot be too angry (lest they appear ungrateful) or too celebratory (lest they appear complicit).

These theoretical frameworks together provide the foundation for understanding how gendered diasporic legibility operates across Iranian American literature.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDERED DIASPORIC LEGIBILITY

I define gendered diasporic legibility as the process by which Iranian American women writers fashion themselves in ways that align with Western modes of reading racialized femininity. This involves:

1. Performing cultural mediation (explaining Iran to Americans).
2. Highlighting feminist resistance (to counter stereotypes of passivity).
3. Offering confessional intimacy (disclosing personal stories of trauma or repression).
4. Demonstrating liberal agency (education, mobility, autonomy).
5. Balancing critique of Iran with critique of U.S. racism, but seldom equally.
6. Avoiding excessive political anger, which destabilizes marketability.

This framework helps explain the recurring structure across Iranian American texts: the Iranian woman author becomes a narrator who both resists and fulfills Western expectations of feminist selfhood. The contradictions embedded in these representational demands mirror what Hooti and Mahmoudi (2013) describe as “identity discordianism,” a condition in which the subject is pulled between competing expectations that destabilize any coherent sense of self. Their analysis of fractured identity formation under social and ideological pressure provides a useful analogue for understanding how Iranian American women’s narratives must negotiate mutually incompatible demands for authenticity, gratitude, resistance, and legibility.

Satrapi’s *Persepolis*: The Visual Production of Feminist Legibility

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* is often celebrated as a feminist narrative of Iranian girlhood, but it also exemplifies gendered diasporic legibility. The

graphic form renders Satrapi's life visually accessible. Veiling, childhood innocence, and political trauma become images that Western readers can decode through familiar frames: oppression, rebellion, individual awakening.

Satrapi's defiance—rejecting dress codes, questioning authority, experimenting with punk fashion—creates a recognizable feminist narrative compatible with Western liberal sensibilities. As Naghibi argues, Satrapi's graphic style “translates the veil into a visual code easily consumable by Western audiences” (Naghibi, 2007, p.249). The images make Iranian girlhood legible by aligning Marji's rebellion with Western feminist ideals of autonomy.

Yet *Persepolis* also critiques France, Austria, and the West more broadly, showing racism, sexual exploitation, and cultural alienation. Still, these critiques are rendered in a humorous tone that softens the political edge—an example of Ahmed's “obligation to be grateful.” Satrapi must remain likable to remain legible.

Thus, *Persepolis* walks a tightrope: resisting Orientalism while remaining readable within its boundaries.

Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No: Memory, Trauma, and Feminized Testimony*

Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No* offers a memoir shaped by the politics of witnessing. The text recounts a Jewish girl's coming-of-age during the Iranian Revolution. As a religious minority, Hakakian's narrative already fits a Western template of persecution; her gender further amplifies the testimonial weight of her story.

Amy Motlagh notes that memoirs like Hakakian's “perform the work of educating Americans about Iran through the lens of personal suffering” (Motlagh, 2012, p.109). This is central to gendered diasporic legibility: Hakakian's narrative grants Western readers intimate access to Iran's political violence, mobilizing trauma as a mode of cross-cultural translation.

Hakakian's prose foregrounds sensory memory—sounds of gunfire, the silence of fear, the smell of family meals interrupted by raids. Trauma becomes the currency of legibility. But Hakakian's critiques of America, when they appear, are muted. The memoir ends with a

sense of arrival and possibility, reinforcing the narrative of rescue.

Gender functions as the hinge: her vulnerability makes her story recognizable; her resilience makes it inspiring.

Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: Feminist Self-Fashioning and Post-9/11 Ambivalence*

Azadeh Moaveni occupies a unique position as a journalist-turned-memoirist whose work blends reportage with self-analysis. *Lipstick Jihad* is often read as a feminist critique of Iranian society, but a closer reading reveals its deeper concern: trying to craft a self who is intelligible in both Iranian and American contexts.

Moaveni must negotiate visibility on multiple fronts:

- As a woman resisting Iranian gender norms
- As an Iranian resisting American stereotypes
- As a diasporic subject resisting both

Her memoir structures itself around the trope of “double exile,” yet the narrative often privileges her American liberal sensibility. This creates a tension: Moaveni critiques Iranian patriarchy, but also critiques post-9/11 American Islamophobia. Still, her critique of the U.S. is constrained by market expectations. Ahmed's theory of affect helps explain this: Moaveni must perform the “happy migrant,” grateful for American freedoms even when those freedoms are compromised by racial suspicion.

Thus, *Lipstick Jihad* demonstrates how Iranian American women writers must self-fashion a feminist modernity that remains culturally legible.

Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: Humor, Immigrant Feminism, and the Softening of Structural Racism*

Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi* stands apart for its comedic tone. Yet humor serves a serious political function: it makes Iranian American immigrant life palatable to mainstream readers.

Dumas recounts xenophobia, name-based discrimination, and the struggles of immigrant assimilation, but she frames these experiences as cultural misunderstandings rather than structural racism. This rhetorical choice aligns

with gendered diasporic legibility: humor allows her to critique exclusion without appearing accusatory. The burden of smiling through racism becomes part of her performance of femininity.

At the same time, Dumas's emphasis on family warmth, parental sacrifice, and the immigrant work ethic reinforces the narrative of American possibility. But the memoir subtly exposes its limits: her father, despite his education, is underemployed; her mother confronts linguistic barriers; Dumas navigates racialization through comedy.

Thus, humor becomes both a survival mechanism and an aesthetic strategy molded by the expectations placed on immigrant women writers.

Sofer's *The Septembers of Shiraz*: Witnessing, Morality, and the Feminized Politics of Compassion

Dalia Sofer's *The Septembers of Shiraz* narrates the imprisonment of a Jewish gem merchant and the quiet suffering of his wife and daughter. The novel deploys gendered perspectives to structure compassion in ways that appeal to Western ethical sensibilities. The wife's interior monologues and the daughter's innocence reinforce the humanitarian framing of Iranian authoritarianism.

Sofer's narrative positions women as the moral conscience of the story. Their fear, patience, and quiet endurance make Iranian political trauma legible to Western readers. Yet the novel stops short of critiquing the American cultural or political context into which this narrative is published. Alsultany's critique of post-9/11 media is useful here: suffering Middle Eastern women provide a safe and sympathetic entry point for Western audiences.

Thus, Sofer's novel exemplifies how gender mediates the legibility of Iranian trauma.

Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*: Gendered Racialization Beyond the Veil

Porochista Khakpour's work offers a counterpoint: she refuses to perform the expected narrative of an oppressed Iranian woman saved by America. Instead, Khakpour's novels foreground racial anxiety, mental illness,

generational conflict, and the psychological violence of assimilation.

While *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* centers a father-son relationship, gender remains central. Khakpour critiques how American discourses feminize Middle Eastern men as emasculated subjects while hypermasculinizing them as threats. Her female characters navigate these contradictions, revealing how Iranian families must negotiate gendered racialization in the aftermath of 9/11.

Khakpour's refusal to perform legibility (as Ahmed terms it) makes her work more radical: she disrupts the expectation that Iranian women should narrate trauma in a way that comforts Western readers.

Khadivi's *The Age of Orphans*: Gendered Violence and the Formation of the National Subject

Although Laleh Khadivi's *The Age of Orphans* focuses on a Kurdish boy forced into assimilation under Reza Shah, the novel foregrounds gender as the axis through which national identity is formed. Khadivi's portrayal of patriarchal state violence against boys—designed to produce “proper men” of the nation—reveals how women's experiences of gender are part of a larger system of gendered nationalism.

While not strictly Iranian American in setting, the novel resonates with diasporic concerns: migration is not always across borders; it can also describe internal displacements produced by nationalism. Khadivi thus expands the concept of diaspora to include gendered violence within Iran, creating a narrative that complicates Western assumptions that gender oppression is unique to the Islamic Republic.

Her work critiques both Iranian and Western patriarchies, subverting the expectation that Iranian diaspora literature must present Iranian women as uniquely victimized.

IV. DISCUSSION: THE CONTRADICTIONS OF GENDERED DIASPORIC LEGIBILITY

Across these diverse texts, several patterns emerge:

1. Feminist visibility is the condition of literary legibility.

Iranian American women must perform feminist agency to be heard, but this agency is shaped by Western expectations of liberation, individualism, and defiance.

2. Trauma becomes a primary mode of cross-cultural translation.

Memoirs rely on experiences of fear, repression, exile, or war to establish narrative authority.

3. Critique of the U.S. must be muted to maintain legibility.

Strong critiques of American racism, imperialism, or orientalism risk undermining marketability.

4. Humor, intimacy, and self-disclosure create affective bonds with Western readers.

This labor is gendered: Iranian men are rarely required to be charming or vulnerable in the same way.

5. Writers like Khakpour and Khadivi disrupt legibility by refusing to conform to expected scripts.

Their work receives less mainstream attention, demonstrating the structural power of legibility.

6. Gender mediates the entire diasporic narrative.

It structures who can speak, how they speak, what stories can be told, and how those stories are received.

V. CONCLUSION

Iranian American women writers operate within a cultural field shaped by Orientalism, post-9/11 geopolitics, Western liberal feminism, and market expectations. While these writers resist reductive representations of Iranian womanhood, their narratives nonetheless reflect the pressures of producing gendered diasporic legibility. Their works illuminate the contradictions of diaspora: the desire to critique Iranian patriarchy while navigating American racialization; the need to educate Western readers while resisting the burden of representation; the push to perform feminist modernity while challenging its colonial underpinnings.

Ultimately, these texts show that gender is not simply a theme in Iranian American literature—it is the primary structure through which diasporic identity becomes visible, consumable, and intelligible. By theorizing gendered diasporic legibility, this paper reveals how Iranian American women's literature both inhabits and subverts the frameworks of recognition that shape immigrant storytelling in the United States.

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