The Fictional Construction of Iran for a Western Readership: from Montesquieu to Nafisi

Amir Ahmadi

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
The University of Queensland in 2016
School of Languages and Cultures
Abstract

The studies of the literary representations of Iran in the West often fall under two categories: one discusses the seventeenth to the nineteenth century when the region was still Persia and the literature was tinged with fantasy and hedonism. The other is twentieth century Iran, which in the Western imagination usually signifies oil, Shahs, and mullahs. The link between the two is often missing, as though these two bodies of scholarship engage two different countries. My study is an effort to address this gap, based on the premise that literary texts, thanks to their capacity for containing complexities and contradictions, can serve as devices for challenging simplified distinctions.

I bring together four texts from the last three centuries deeply engaged with Iran in their own ways: Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (1721), James Morier’s *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan* (1824), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (1999), and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). The four chosen texts all became bestsellers when published and were discussed widely. They are written in English and French for non-Iranian readers. They are geographically set in Iran or Persia, and their protagonists are Persians or Iranians. Therefore, they make great examples for a study of literary representations of Iran at various points in history.

The theoretical framework of this project is founded on ‘geocriticism’ and ‘literary cartography’, two recently developed modes of literary theory articulated by, among others, Bernard Westphal and Robert Tally, in turn inspired by the rise of radical geography and spatial theory in the 1970s and 80s. As a whole, Oriental studies leans towards Foucauldian historicism and periodization, which tends to lock texts within their historical contexts, thereby hampering the possibility of intertextual dialogue across time. The dominance of such a method is partially responsible for the disparity between studies of ‘Persia’ and ‘Iran’. Theories related to the spatial capacities of narrative can break the sway of historicism.

In my opening chapter on Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, I begin by taking a quantitative angle to challenge assumptions that this is primarily a scathing criticism of French society at the time. I focus on the Persian aspects and show how they coalesce around the metaphorical site of the harem. The harem is constructed as a complex microcosm of Persia, one with its particular
power relations, and show how the self-empowering of women through negotiating with their husband-master topples the dominant structure.

The second chapter discusses James Morier’s nineteenth century picaresque, *Adventures of Hajji Baba*. I focus on episodes that take place on the borders of Persia to show how the instability of the land is used by Morier to represent Hajji Baba’s behavior as picaro. Taking the spatiality of the land into account, Iran is constructed as a vast unstable patchwork with no central authority. Hajji Baba then appears as a restless character doing his best to survive.

The third chapter on *Persepolis*, a graphic novel published in 1999, takes a more visual approach. I interpret *Persepolis* as an act of mapping that moves through various sections of Iranian society in order to create an alternative geography. Marji, the protagonist, is driven by a strong sense of curiosity and defiance, which takes the reader frame by frame into various parts of Iranian society and leads to a unique spatial construction of Iran as a flexible set of territories.

In my fourth chapter on *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I begin by discussing how post-9/11 politics plays itself out in the reception of this memoir. This chapter cuts through the politics of the time to explore the internal dynamics of the book and show why it became a polarizing phenomenon. Iran here is portrayed as a mutilated land with insurmountable gaps, a construction that leads to polarized characterizations of the country and its inhabitants, and depicts Iran as a place in which all the links among people and possibilities of resistance are removed.

In terms of historical context, these four works have little in common. Consequently, rather than aspiring to articulate an evolutionary narrative, I study four literary snapshots of Iran across three centuries. By moving beyond periodization and deploying literary cartography, I have these texts talk to each other across seemingly independent timeframes, which, for the first time, reveals interesting overlaps among seemingly disparate books, such as the way Montesqueieu’s harem is reconstructed in *Reading Lolita*, or how *Persepolis*’s restless character finds an antecedent in *Hajji Baba*. Exploring the mapmaking capacities of those texts, I show that the similarities and contrasts between them go beyond historical confinements. In doing so, this project will be an attempt to undermine a widespread stereotype about Iran as the nation that deserves castigation, since it failed to live up to its glorious past.
Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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Publications during candidature

Peer-reviewed articles


Conference Papers

Ahmadi Arian, Amir. ‘Mapping a Graphic Territory: a Geophilosophical Reading of Persepolis’. Department of Languages and Cultures, University of Queensland, Australia 2014.


Publications included in this thesis

Contributions by others to the thesis

No Contribution by others.
Statement of parts of the thesis submitted to qualify for the award of another degree

Chapter four submitted for MPhil, The University of Queensland, 2012, thesis withdrawn from assessment and project converted to PhD.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisors, Dr. Joe Hardwick and Dr. Juliana De Nooy, for their suggestions and generous support.
**Keywords**

Iran, the West, representation, literature, narrative, orientalism, literary cartography, spatiality.

**Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classifications (ANZSRC)**

Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classifications (ANZSRC)
ANZSRC code: 200209 Multicultural, Intercultural and Cross-cultural Studies 20%
ANZSRC code: 200211 Postcolonial Studies 20%
ANZSRC code: 200524 Comparative Literature Studies 60%

**Fields of Research (FoR) Classification**

FoR code: 2002 Cultural Studies 40%
FoR code: 2005 Literary Studies 60%
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Chapter One
Introduction

For the last few decades, Iran has hardly been out of the headlines, and its presence there has often been concomitant with bad news or danger. However, the ordinary Iranians who live a day-to-day life in this country are frequently surprised by the ways their image is constructed and presented in the media. Such a disparity provokes several questions: where might such an image have derived from? Is this only the function of the post-revolutionary standoff with the West, or does it have a longer pedigree? This study will address questions like these by taking as its object of enquiry literary texts. Here I will discuss four texts that have contributed substantially to literary constructions of Iran for a Western audience over almost three centuries.

The Dangerous Duplicity of Iran, Past and Present
In the most recent stage of attention to Iran in March 2015, after a long and arduous negotiation process, Iran and six world powers struck a deal concerning Iran’s nuclear program. The benefits of the deal are too important to dismiss: it forestalls a nuclear arms race in the region and opens up new channels of diplomacy between Iran and the West. However, the deal has had staunch opponents. An overview of their arguments reveals an interesting recurrent theme, one that echoes all too familiar representations of Iran and Iranians through the centuries, which have been repeated from the mainstream media all the way to literary works, some of which will be discussed in this study.

The opponents of the deal barely refer to the facts, and often prefer to fall back on outdated descriptions of Iranians as cunning and duplicitous, a people with two faces: one public and one private, one designed as a veneer to baffle the world, the other, the true one, which shows their real intentions. The idea of duplicity, as one usually expects from the mainstream media, has been delivered in a rather simplistic, somewhat sensational way, as ‘cheating’. This word choice strips this duality of its sophistication and makes it sound like a vice.

The word ‘cheating’ and its derivatives appear with fascinating frequency in anti-deal arguments. Barack Obama spoke after the deal was reached, and laid out the facts, but the line that captured the most attention was this: ‘if Iran cheats, the world will know it’. From Obama’s extensive
account of the deal, it is this statement, a hypothetical line about a not so likely event in the future, that made it to the headlines of, among other papers, the Washington Post (Eliperin). Within a few days after the deal was struck, experts from left and right warned that Iran’s behaviour ‘will not be verifiable’, and continually referred to Iran’s past dishonesty in negotiations, without explaining what this consisted of. Sometimes imagined scenarios took strange turns. One expert conjectured that Iran ‘could cheat by shipping secretly built nuclear arms to North Korea’ (Gertz). Another argued that verifying Iran’s activities is virtually impossible, because ‘Iran is already the single most IAEA-inspected nation in the world and additional IAEA inspections are not expected to be better’ (Gertz), which attributes somewhat otherworldly powers of cheating to Iran as a country that can outwit all the inspection technologies available to Western powers. Another expert worried that ‘unless any cheating is really egregious it will be hard to get international consensus on what to do about it’ (Bupalo), and an article in the journal Foreign Policy, almost two months before the negotiators concluded, came with the title: ‘Is Iran Already Cheating on a Nuclear Deal?’ (Tobey). This was based on the fact that an institution for nuclear research had opened recently in Tehran, even though by the time the Foreign Policy article was written, no part of the deal had been implemented or even ratified.

The idea of cheating does not arise out of nowhere. It conforms to the discourse that considers Iran a strange two-faced nation that is simultaneously Persia and Iran, Islamic and non-Islamic, a pioneer of modern values at one moment and a dangerously conservative place at another, a country at home with wearing different hats depending on the situation, and which should be treated with great caution.

These notions are so embedded in the general understanding of Iran that one hears them frequently from Iranians themselves, that they have two unmatchable faces, even characters, which brings about the alleged unreliability. On a Yahoo Answers page, a user has asked for honest opinions to the following question: ‘What are the stereotypes of Iranians/Persians?’ and among the several answers given to this question, one by other users is marked ‘best answer’ and highlighted by its position at the top of the page. Presumably written by an Iranian, this answer emphasises the point about ‘cheating’ quite passionately: ‘Unfortunately we tend to deceive other people and trick them, normally with making friendly faces and act [sic] like an old friend, until the last moment of final blow’ (Yahoo Answers). This notion goes all the way up to high-
ranked politicians in Iran: privately responding to the question of a journalist about the reason for widespread secrecy in Iran’s political system, a well-known MP replied: ‘Architects don’t build glass houses in Iran. If you don’t speak of everything so openly, it’s better. Being able to keep a secret even if you have to mislead is considered a sign of maturity. It’s Persian wisdom’ (Sciolino 35). One can trace the idea of Iranians as hypocrites from the coverage of the nuclear negotiations in the early years of the twenty-first century all the way back to travelogues and accounts by the European diplomats and merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including pivotal works of scholarship such as Lord Curzon’s Persia and the Persian Question (1892) and John Malcolm’s History of Persia (1814). However, it has noticeably been accentuated after the 1979 revolution, when Iran fell out of favour with the Western powers, and a part of their propaganda to isolate the country fell back on old cliché: images about a two-faced, duplicitous nation.

These images have taken shape through centuries and are deeply entrenched in the Western public imagination. In our contemporary world, they serve to boost a phenomenon studied in detail by Mahmood Mamdani in Good Muslim, Bad Muslim. Mamdani argues that George W. Bush’s division of Muslims into good and bad, according to which the bad Muslims engage in terrorism and the good ones are ‘anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime [9/11] and would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them’” (Mamdani 15), reverses the presumption of innocence: all Muslims are presumed ‘bad’ until they join the right side in the war against terrorism.

In the Iranian context, part of the discourse about Iranians being hypocritical and duplicitous refers to the history of the country, which shows drastic ideological shifts and swings. Such a discourse, in part, arises from the fact that two words have been used to designate the same country and its people, namely: Persia/Persians, by which we mean Iranians before the twentieth century, a term denoting innocuousness, harmlessness, exoticism and sexual indulgence; and Iran/Iranians, which usually brings to mind radical Islamism, oil, mullahs and terrorism, particularly in the mainstream media (Fayyaz and Shirazi). In other words, the history of Iran in the Western imagination is divided into two parts: one condonable and entertaining, the other terrifying and dangerous. As the idea of dual personality translates to nuclear negotiations, it suggests that Iran can mislead the world all the time by maneuvering between these two characters. This ability to contain seemingly contradictory qualities has translated into different
images across time, depending on the situation. The most recent incarnation of it is Iranians as ‘cheaters’, requiring a knack for duplicity, a deep-seated duality in character and behavior.

This study aims to contextualize and question this interpretation of a long history by analyzing literary works from both periods, to show how Persia-Iran has been constructed in literary works across centuries, in order to see how the literary representations of Iran and Iranians respond to such images and understandings. Since literary works are usually far less politically charged than the mainstream forms of representation, this study will investigate whether they corroborate this entrenched image of Iran as an enigmatic nation of hypocrites with a dual personality, one that, when needed, swings between ‘Iranianness’ and ‘Persianness’ to deceive the world. In the course of this study, it will turn out that this two-facedness, as portrayed in literary works, functions more as a survival tactic than as a method of deception, a way to get through all sorts of difficulties imposed on characters, and sometimes, by extension, a nation, through its tumultuous history.

The relation between Iran and the West had already been formed at the beginning of the eighteenth century. From the first travelogues all the way to the most recent Facebook posts, innumerable perceptions and images of Iran have taken form and disappeared, and the accumulation of this information has led to images and notions which people interpret in infinitely different ways. Literary texts make up a part of this flow, a small but important one: they convey a powerful set of images that have come to capture the ineluctable ambiguity of Iran. The images they construct, thus, are of great importance, and the more popular they were at their time, the more influential their images became. The examples discussed in this project take a leap towards capturing Iran as a whole and embracing its ambiguities, and since they have been so widely-read in their time, their impact is likely to be greater than other cases that have tried to do the same. They are, therefore, worthy of close study, if one cares about the ways in which Iran is and has been represented in the West.

In order to see how literary works participate in the history of the representation of Iran and Iranians in the West, I have selected works of literature in this study that had a considerable influence on the public image of Iran in the West when they were published. This set of books is selected not to prove the cliché that literature teaches us about other people and lands more than journalistic accounts or history books. This is not my primary concern. I believe that literary
works connected to Iran in one way or another have much to say about this country, but not just for conventional reasons. In this particular case, the sheer ambiguity of the geopolitical entity called Iran requires a level of sophistication that not many visual or written forms of communication are able to offer. If one is to tackle the ambiguous, literature seems to be an indispensable medium.

Michael Chabon, the acclaimed American novelist, whose last novel, *Telegraph Avenue*, contains a chapter about Barak Obama’s fundraising in 2004, when asked by *The Guardian* about his opinion on Obama as a writer, responded: ‘I think he is a very good writer’, and explains why: ‘I recognize that he thinks like a writer, by which, in part, I mean he seems to be comfortable with ambiguity. He’s nuanced, and he sees the other side of things quite easily’ (Chabon). If this is indeed the case, then a literary author, in the broadest sense of the word that covers the authors of various literary genres, seems to be a plausible source to refer to when it comes to Iran. With a fraught and complicated history, Iran has been subject to too many hasty judgments and misunderstandings, and the vicious circle of staunch defence by its fans and resentful attack by its foes recurs almost invariably. If one is interested in breaking the cycle, literature is a powerful tool. Speaking about Iran requires a mindset able to contain unmatchable notions and contradictory data, and to be comfortable with ambiguity.

To fulfill this aim, I have looked to books that have the literary capacity to address ambiguity, so as to increase the likelihood of achieving a more complex and nuanced image of Persia/Iran. Since the impact of those images matters, I have searched for examples that have contributed significantly to the cultural representation of Iran in the West. As a result, the corpus was narrowed down to texts that, at the time of publication, became best-sellers and were discussed widely, and later on studied and remembered as examples that greatly contributed to constructing an image of Iran. Moreover, all these books are written in non-Persian languages, namely English and French, and thus their target audiences were non-Iranians. They are all geographically set in Iran or Persia, and, significantly, the protagonists in all of them are Iranians. This last criterion has two important aspects: first, since it confines the corpus to the supposed insider accounts, it necessarily excludes travelogues, which, although a rich source of representations of Persia and Iran, by definition offer the view of an outsider. Second, the Iranian protagonist creates an opportunity to analyze the Iranian character constructed by literary works at different times, and to see how their alleged duplicity has been understood by various writers.
in different eras. As will be discussed, the main character in each of these books, in one way or another, becomes trapped in a situation where he or she must conceal their true intention in order to survive and move on. Such dissimulation is portrayed in each book, in one way or another, as a survival tactic in the face of the powers that be. A large part of this study will be dedicated to teasing out such tactics and their portrayal in literary narrative, which will shed fresh light on the idea of Iranians as duplicitous.

The four texts I have chosen for this project are: Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (1721), James Morier’s *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan* (1824), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (1999), and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). As is obvious from these choices, I have taken literature in its broadest sense, which includes fiction and life narratives alike: respectively, the choices are an epistolary novel, a picaresque novel, a graphic novel, and a memoir. Moreover, as the publication dates imply, I have chosen examples from the last three centuries, two from each side of the aforementioned divide that constructs the duality between Persia and Iran. It follows that this project has no claim to a historiography of literary representations of Iran. I have selected four points on this continuum, four snapshots as it were, and will focus primarily on each case separately, then on unexpected points of connection that these books from different eras may have with each other, in order to challenge deeply entrenched stereotypes about Iran as the nation of glorious past and terrible present.

In this study I try to stay close to the chosen texts as much as possible, and keep the discussions about other works of the writers to a minimum. That is the reason why in the cases of Morier, Satrapi, and Nafisi their other books are not discussed at any length here. This project is essentially an exercise in taking one book as an independent unit, and analyzing it according to a particular theoretical framework, so as to bring a sense of methodological consistency to the project, and keep the focus of each chapter on one specific text. The only exception is the *Persian Letters* chapter, where I make brief references to *Spirit of Laws*. The reason, as will be pointed out in the chapter, is that many critics and interpreters later considered *Persian Letters* an introduction of sorts to *Spirit of Laws*, and interpreted it as Montesquieu’s fledgling exercise in political philosophy. I quote the section about Persia in *Spirit of Laws* to show that, even if we talk only on the level of the content and bracket off the fact that a novel is not comparable to a political treatise without a solid justification, his view on Persia has evolved, or rather devolved, substantially from that expressed in *Persian Letters*. 


My vehicle to make the argument concerning the recurrent stereotypes about Iran and Iranians is literature, and I will show how important literary representations of Iran, selected from very different historical contexts, bear interesting contrasts and remarkable resemblances through time and across continents. Before elaborating on the theoretical framework, I will lay out a brief history of the representations of Iran in Western literature. Although, as will be discussed in the next chapter, in this thesis I avoid historicism in order to concentrate on spatial theories, it is first necessary to outline a broad historical context within which the chosen texts are located.

*Iran and the West: a Survey of Literary Representations*

The history of European interest in Iran is a long and multifaceted one. Through several centuries, different cultures and governments struck intermittent relations with Iran at different times. It should be noted from the outset that when we talk about Europe in this context, we mean primarily France and Britain. Of course the relationships were not limited to these two countries, but the corpus chosen for this project, is selected from England and France, and later—from beyond Europe—the US, so I will focus on relationships with these countries in order to give a sense of the history within which these texts are embedded. Also, historically speaking, for a long time Britain and France were by far the most engaged countries of the West with the so-called Near East, as their colonial interests demanded, and their involvement in Persian-Iranian affairs was a substantial part of their grand projects in the region.

Concerning Anglo-Persian and Franco-Persian relations, it seems fair to mark the early seventeenth century as a starting point. In the British context, it began with the presence of the East India Company in the south of Iran from the turn of the seventeenth century. The company gradually established a foothold, and by 1622 not only played a pivotal role in the economy of the region, but functioned as a de facto embassy and ran diplomatic affairs between the two countries. On the French side, the first attempt to establish a relationship with Persia occurred in 1622 under Louis XIII, who sent an envoy to Persia to demonstrate the willingness of the French king to be a mediator between the Persian and Ottoman empires, two regional super powers experiencing a very hostile period. Louis XIII was also interested in protecting the Catholic community in Persia. From this period, the diplomatic, and later on cultural, relationships between the two European powers and Persia thrived and diversified, and continue to this day.
They inevitably affected cultural relations, and led to the rise of literary works that look at such developments in their own way (Calmard).

In this section, I will briefly offer an overview of the history of British and French literary representations of Persia through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then I will discuss literary interest in the region in the twentieth century which will necessarily include the US as the major foreign country engaged in Iranian affairs during this period, particularly the ways in which post-revolutionary Iran has been represented in literary works. I will also explain why the argument proposed by this project promises to shed new light on this seemingly divided and fragmentary history. Since the set of theories employed in this study, this chapter will explore the background and the context within which such theories emerge in some details, to describe better what I use as my theoretical tool here. In the end, I briefly expound the ways in which such theories will be applied on the four books that will be the subjects of the four following chapters.

In the British context, the main cultural event that followed the advent of political and economic relations with Persia was the establishment of a Persian professorship at the University of Oxford in 1765, followed by the publication of the first comprehensive scholarly work on Persian language and grammar in 1771 by Sir William Jones, as well as the first Persian-Arabic-English dictionary compiled by John Richardson in 1777. In other words, within a decade, the Persian language was plucked out of anonymity by British diplomats and scholars, and was studied quite widely, which suggests a dramatic rise in the attention paid to Persia in a short space of time (Melville).

With regard to literary representations, Persia came to the attention of poets and authors long before scholars or politicians or merchants, albeit in a rather different way. Pre-seventeenth century literary authors, perhaps unsurprisingly, emphasized the exotic aspects of what they perceived as Persia. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton allows Persia to figure remarkably. There are multiple references in the poem to ancient Persia, particularly the famous battle between the Persians and the Greeks where, quite surprisingly, Milton portrays Xerxes as the liberator of the Greeks. Sporadic references to Persia also appear in the works of other renaissance literary figures, such as Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queen* (1596) and Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587). As we approach the eighteenth century, the exoticism is still full-
blown, albeit in a different form. Persia figures in the works of many English authors, most notably John Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast* (1697).

At the start of the nineteenth century, the widespread literary exoticism begins to recede, and more nuanced, sophisticated literary representations emerge. A literary work almost entirely devoted to a presentation of Persia is Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* (1817). This long poem narrates the story of an Indian princess married to a Persian prince who is also an adept poet. The man tells the bride stories in verse to cheer her up. The poem consists of four episodes, and makes an interesting example of oscillation between traditional Orientalism and socio-political concerns. The first and the third stories are concerned with power and politics, and even imply untimely suspicions about the alleged benevolence of the empire, while the second and fourth stories indulge in typical Orientalist stories of virility and passion. *Lalla Rookh*, therefore, marks the beginning of a transition towards a more grounded and realistic form of literary representation of Persia (Peernajmodin).

The publication of this long poem coincides with a considerable shift in British policies towards Persia, largely because of the growing geopolitical importance of Persia as the gateway to India at the time Napoleon showed interest in conquering India. The British knew well that, by keeping Persia under control, they could secure their hold on India and keep the French at bay. Consequently, in the early years of the nineteenth century, British diplomats and merchants began to flock to Persia, which resulted in a welter of groundbreaking documents, ranging from literary fiction to travelogues and scholarship, most notably John Malcolm’s *The History of Persia* (1815). For the purpose of this study, however, I will look briefly at specifically literary works, which is a fairly small subset of this enterprise in the nineteenth century.

Less than a decade after the appearance of *Lalla Rookh*, James Morier’s *Adventures of Hajji Baba* was published, and as will be discussed in the fourth chapter of this study, this book turned out to be a game-changer, a pioneer for well-calculated, more realistic and representational narratives that operate at the level of political pragmatism, rather than orientalist fantasies. The impact of this book can be seen by comparing the literary works that appeared before and after *Hajji Baba*: while indulgence in Orientalist fantasies was commonplace in the eighteenth century, and accuracy in literary works was far from being a concern, after *Hajji Baba* such self-indulgence became outdated. For example, Matthew Arnold’s long poem, *Sohrab and Rustum*
(1853), is a meticulous reconstruction of a tale from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, published in the tenth century, which shows a considerable knowledge of Persian classical literature, previously a rarity. Similarly informed was Alfred Tennyson, who took it up on himself to achieve fluency in Persian before holding a dialogue with Persian poetry in his own work (Peernajmodin). The most remarkable instance is of course Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* (1859), which became a canonical text in English poetry. It is worth mentioning that the nascent stage of cultural attention to Persia in the US also occurred around the same time, with a peculiar penchant for Sa’adi’s poetry shared by American transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular (Dabashi, *Iran*).

The French turned to Persia earlier, but culturally speaking, they never focused on it as much as the British did. The first French school that systematically taught and studied Persian language was set up in Istanbul in 1669. Overall, French Orientalism was much more engaged with the Arab world and the Ottoman Empire than with Persia, due to France’s imperial priorities. This also holds for the literary representations. Seventeenth century works, such as Madeleine de Scudéry’s *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus* (1649) and Pierre Corneille’s *Rodogune* (1644) are replete with mythical depictions of ancient Persia and fantastical stories of kings and conquerors. Such an image of Persia was corroborated by Antoine Galland’s translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, which appeared from 1701. Its publication hit like an earthquake and inspired many authors, a few of them drawn to the Persian aspect of that book.

The best-known literary work in the French context that deals with Persia is Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, which will be discussed in detail later. Although the eighteenth century French literary scene is remarkable in terms of its literary attention to Persia, Montesquieu’s first novel is somewhat exceptional with respect to its precision and degree of seriousness. In most other eighteenth century French works, the over-exoticization of Persia is indulged in, and others, unlike Montesquieu, barely showed an interest in contemporary Persia. In another well-known work by another enlightenment forefather, Voltaire’s *Zadig ou la Destinée* (1747), a timeless, idyllic, pre-Islamic Persia is constructed to set the stage for a romanticized version of Zoroastrianism, probably the only religion that Voltaire truly admired.

As we move to the nineteenth century, similar to Britain, the attraction to Persian classical poetry rose dramatically, and great figures of French romanticism such as Victor Hugo made frequent
references to the classical Persian poets. Gérard de Nerval’s somewhat imaginary travelogue, 
*Voyage en Orient* (1851), is essentially a romantic take on the idyllic Persia manifested in 
Voltaire’s work, packed with over-the-top admiration for the spiritual atmosphere of the land. 
The tendency towards romanticization of Persia remained more or less dominant well into the 
twentieth century: Pierre Loti’s *Vers Isfahan* (1900) describes an imaginary journey on the back 
of a horse through the heart of Persia, from the shore of the Persian Gulf up to Isfahan. The 
poetry-inspired image of Persia garnered a particular popularity among homosexual writers like 
André Gide and Henry de Montherlant, who praised Persian love poems due to the gender 
ambiguity of pronouns in Persian language (Duchesne-Guillemin). Overall, unlike the British 
history of literary representations of Persia, which enters a somewhat realistic phase in the 
nineteenth century, the French authors held onto the traditional exotic image of Persia as a place 
for indulgence and excess which Western countries denied them. Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, 
despite its numerous moments of exoticization, is an exceptional book in terms of its deep 
engagement with Persia, in particular its socio-political hierarchies.

More often than not, the extent to which the literary community in a country deals with a culture 
is directly related to the level of political and diplomatic engagements. The further we come into 
the twentieth century, the less frequent the literary representations of Persia in Britain and France 
become; at the same time, a rapid increase in American interest in the region appears. For 
Americans, the main turning point was the notorious 1953 coup d’état, orchestrated by the CIA, 
but the great shock was of course the 1979 revolution. The closest ally of the West in the region 
in general and the US in particular became their number one enemy virtually overnight. The 
hostage crisis in 1980 followed closely on its heels, and Iran transformed into the birthplace of 
an unprecedented form of political Islam, which has remained a great preoccupation of the world 
to this day.

In terms of literary representation, the Americans seem to have coped with contemporary Iran 
fairly easily, and their style of literary representation bears little correspondence to that of their 
British and French predecessors. Whether due to the lack of a history of encounter, or because of 
the large number of Iranian expatriates in the US after the revolution, nineteenth century 
European exoticism barely influenced American literature about Iran. Instead, new forms of 
representation emerged, of which memoir stands out as the most appreciated and studied one. 
The recent slew of exile memoirs, mostly written by women, ranges from the memoirs of
traumatizing exile and problematic relationships with the homeland from afar (Bahrampour), to growing up in the US and returning to Iran to encounter unexpected cultural vitality and grassroots resistance (Moaveni), to an insider’s account of the Jewish community’s life before and after the revolution (Hakakian). While most of these books have been quite successful and well-received, the most famous by far is Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran, which will be discussed at length in this study.

The theoretical and critical considerations of Iran have also evolved along with those ups and downs. it goes without saying that the country we call Iran today is markedly different from the Persia the European authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote about. To begin with, it bears a different name: in 1935, around the time the incumbent leaders resorted to nationalism to hold together a country trapped in the rivalry of European superpowers and the rise of Nazism, Reza Shah decided to change Persia, the name given to the country by the ancient Greeks, to Iran, which is derived from the ‘original’ name of the land. He could not predict the effects of this simple change of names, but they have been enormous, so much so that in the public imagination of the world, these two words denote two almost completely different sets of ideas: Iran, by which nowadays people mostly mean the post-revolutionary Iran, usually signifies radical Islam, oil, Shahs, and mullahs, while Persia often invokes fantasy, magic, hedonism, leisurely cats and precious rugs.

Before the twentieth century, Persia was a rather unknown place, thus it was easier for the literati of the time to project their imagination on the land and emerge with exotic stories. Also, it was considered a politically innocuous place, a non-player in world politics with little agency that, at best, could mount only minor resistance to the ambitions of empires. Post-revolutionary Iran, on the other hand, has often seemed a dangerous and unpredictable place. Having been a great ally to the West under the Shah’s rule, the country turned its back on them and sent signals horrifying to many, suggesting the rise of a new form of political Islam in the world. There are of course many other factors involved, which easily show why contemporary Iran appears to have almost nothing to do with the old Persia.

Accordingly, the scholarship around the literary representations of Persia almost never covers these two periods together. In his comprehensive dissertation, Hossein Peernajmodin puts forth a detailed history of such representations from the Renaissance, but the study ends with Hajji
Baba, which marks the threshold of a new period (Peernajmodin). In Farzad Boobani’s book, we read a meticulously historicized account of the literary representations of Persia in English literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but it also ends with Hajji Baba and turns to travelogues for the rest of the nineteenth century, thus stopping short of providing any account of the ramifications of literary works in the twentieth century (Boobani). The most unconventional study is perhaps conducted by Lisa Lowe, whose book discusses several instances of Orientalism in the British and French traditions without overly taking heed of historical limits, which enables her to take up Montesquieu’s Persian Letters along with Julia Kristeva’s Des Chinoises (1974) and E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India (1924) in one book. However, because this study does not focus on a particular region, the potential points of resemblance between these books are not discussed (Lowe).

On the other hand, there are many studies about contemporary literary representations of Iran, particularly in the post-revolutionary era, with no apparent effort to see this body of texts as related to the corpus produced in previous centuries. This stands out in the studies that address more than one memoir or novel in order to talk about a movement or period. Gillian Whitlock, for example, discusses Reading Lolita and Persepolis extensively, two works that will be analyzed here as well, but she looks at them within the context of current political-social affairs in the world, rather than as part of a body of literary texts devoted to representing Iran for Western readers (Whitlock). So does Negar Mottahedeh, who sees the recent upsurge of memoirs written by women as a campaign prop used by the American government to justify its post-9/11 adventures in the Middle East (Mottahedeh). In another study, Liora Hendelman-Baavur tries to find a more abstract and universal notion that binds these memoirs together, and discusses the ways in which each memoir constructs a mobile, flexible notion of home to deal with exile, but her study also remains limited to the experiences of the Iranian women after the revolution (Hendelman-Baavur).

It seems, therefore, that an unwritten rule has marginalized any study that brings together texts from different historical periods, and scholars have, by and large, bought into the distinction the public imagination has drawn between Persia and Iran, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and our time. Has the discontinuity been so huge that these two places, the Persia of previous centuries and contemporary Iran, are really fundamentally two different countries? This dichotomy is far from innocent, of course. It creates public nostalgia, a rigid, almost mythical set
of historical narratives, and generates a sense of failure in the Iranian public, as though Iranians have failed to continue to be the globally acknowledged people they once were. In this study, I intend to argue against this dichotomy, and in order to do this I have selected four texts from two ends of this historical continuum, so as to show that the ways in which this geopolitical entity has been constructed by literary narratives bear remarkable resemblances across times and continents.

My study is an effort to address this gap, and show, by a comparative analysis of literary works across this intervening period, that such a duality can be criticized through a close reading of the literary texts belonging to both sides of this chasm. In order to take on such a project, one needs a specific kind of theoretical tool, which enables one to move smoothly across history without having to deal with the strong shackles of historicism, which often ties the text to its historical context. In other words, it is necessary to theoretically justify a co-analysis of two or more texts that, on the surface, have little in common. Moving beyond historicism is the prerequisite of embarking on such a project. Putting historical analysis aside, however, inevitably creates a theoretical vacuum, which should be filled by other theoretical tools.
Chapter Two
An Overview of Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I lay out the set of theories that will be employed throughout the thesis for analyzing the texts. In this study a somewhat unusual conceptual toolkit has been chosen, which does not consist of staples of literary theory. Applying spatial concepts, such as territory, mapping, spatial circumscription, geopolitical instability to literary texts does not usually happen in literary studies. Therefore, to set the stage for the introduction of the theoretical framework, I start by explaining how a move towards geography enables us to loosen the constraints of periodization, and briefly go through the relatively short history of the introduction of geographical concepts into literary theory, which began with the ‘spatial turn’ in humanities in the 1970s.

Beyond Periodization, towards Geography
Eric Hayot’s criticism of periodization paves the way for literary scholars to move beyond historicism more easily. For Hayot, period has become a ‘transconcept’ (Hayot 149), by which he means the structuring concept that forms the overarching and fundamental definitions, the concept that, thanks to its omnipresence, is hard to see. In literary studies, he argues, we have developed a ‘collective desire to remain institutionally inside periods’ (149), and expand or shorten periods within which a study takes place, forgetting that ‘all periods are concepts’ (150), and sometimes blindly base the entire field on periodical divisions:

In short, our entire system of literary education, from the first-year undergraduate survey to the forms of judgment governing publication, promotion, and tenure, reifies the period as its central historical concept. (150)

Such an embedded notion, resulting from the triumph of historicism through the history of literary theory, has made it difficult to move across periods and centuries smoothly, since it has established a not-so-accurate belief that a defined period is a self-contained one, and crossing it over to another period requires a serious intellectual endeavor.

Like other longstanding and well-established concepts, periodization is not easy to put aside. There remains a theoretical void that should be filled by other means and theories. Hayot is
aware of that, and has a few suggestions: for instance, playing with the commonplace division of periods. The closer we get to our time the shorter the periods become, in the sense that we tend to discuss twentieth century in terms of decades and the Middle Ages in terms of centuries, since the former is closer to our life experience. Hayot suggests turning this around: by studying the twentieth century as one period under one rubric and by dividing, say, the fifteenth century into ten decades and studying it as ten different periods, which gives a very different perception of history. One of Hayot’s suggestions has to do with geography: oftentimes, periodization assumes national limits, and conducts the study within the borders of a nation state. In other worlds, periodization imposes limits to time and place simultaneously (156). So why not break the grasp of nation-states and study texts across geopolitical borders?

Taking a cue from this suggestion, one can expand the discussion towards larger categories that enable one to constitute a whole new branch of literary theory, which ventures outside the confines of periodization. A move towards space is not merely a tactical change. It invokes the old, known duality of history vs. geography which, in the context of this project, can be translated into other dualities that reside at the intersection of literary theory and geography: narrative time vs. narrative space, or plot vs. place. In other words, this is not simply a trick to move across time spans with ease, but it rather suggests a whole new theoretical ground, a fresh set of tools for analyzing literary texts. As a result, in the course of this project, not only are the texts compared despite their historical differences, but within each text, the emphasis is put on the spatial features of the narrative, rather than on its temporal ones. Due to this shift of focus, a substantial reconsideration of the basic concepts of narrative theory will take place. For instance, we traditionally regard plot as a temporal concept, as an order in which the events of a narrative occur. Plot, however, is essentially a map, a guide to take the reader from one point to another, so it has strong spatial connotations, which are often overlooked. This connotation of plot takes centre stage in this project.

This study will focus on geography, and more specifically, on spatial theory. Such an approach enables this project to move more easily across centuries and juxtapose texts that, within the logic of periodization, could not easily be considered together. In doing so, I will invoke spatiality theory and literary cartography, two burgeoning fields developed mostly in the twenty-first century. But before discussing these, it will be necessary to study the background within which these new concepts have come into being. This is one theoretical strand of the project.
Another theoretical discourse I will draw upon is Orientalism. Having chosen to look at books written and published in the West about Iran, it is clear that I am already in the field where theories related to Orientalism and post-colonialism are prominent. This project is, after all, concerned with observing a country and its people as an outsider or expatriate and reporting to other outsiders via literary narrative, so it seems inevitable to turn to theories related to Orientalism and colonialism. From the outset, however, one point needs to be explained: even though Iran has never been a colony in the conventional sense of the word, large swathes of it have undergone significant experiences of colonization, in the north by the Russians and in the south by the British. Also, Iranians have seen any number of titular rulers and high officials installed by the British or Russians, and more recently Americans, so Iranians have a vivid memory of being ruled by others. If colonialism is ‘the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods’, and if it is true that ‘everywhere it [colonialism] locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history’ (Loomba 2), then substantial parts of Iran have certainly been colonized for more than a century. This project, therefore, is very aware of being already involved in the old vexing question of West-East relations, of which colonialism is perhaps the largest component.

In terms of the theoretical tools I will deploy during this project, as mentioned above, addressing the intersection of literature and geography through analyzing mapmaking processes and cartographic capacities of literary narratives is a very recent development. Apart from the theoretical freshness of the approach, which makes this study more relevant to our time, geographical discourses are particularly important in this context, because mapping and exploration are arguably two of the most, if not the most, salient elements of any colonial relationship.

When it comes to Iran, the geography of this relationship features even more prominently. The Western geographical engagement with Iran goes as far back as ancient Greece. Edward Said sees one of the starting points of Orientalism in Aeschylus: ‘as early as Aeschylus’s play The Persians the Orient is transformed from a very far distant and often threatening Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar’ (Said, Orientalism 21). In this text, the Greek playwright talks about Asia as the defeated other, but he in fact tells the story of defeating Xerxes and overcoming Persians, as though Persia and Asia were the same. Arnold Toynbee shows that the first imaginary line the Greeks drew to distinguish themselves from the people to their east was
between the Greeks and the Ionians, because the Ionians had pledged allegiance to the Persians, which enraged the Greeks. They set out to take revenge, and did so by establishing a precarious border between themselves and the Ionians, which was to become the line that separated Europe from Asia (Toynbee 718).

Toynbee reveals that the distinction between East and West first came down to the tension between Persia and Greece. Thus, the first border that separated Europe and Asia was the product of ethnic infighting and had no geographical basis. Amazingly enough, this invisible, contingent line has more or less been maintained and regarded as the legitimate boundary between two continents ever since. This speaks to the importance of Persia as a ‘place’, a geographical entity, since this is the habitat of the very civilization against which the Greeks, and thereby the Europeans, consolidated their identity.

I will begin by reviewing the theories that have covered subjects similar to mine, namely the theoretical discourses on West-East relationships as a whole, which was largely founded by Edward Said. I will then talk about the spatial turn in the humanities and more recent approaches towards geographical readings of colonial or postcolonial situations. Finally, I will turn to humanistic geography and literary cartography as my primary theoretical sources, and explore the role humanistic geography attributes to narrative for understanding place, and literary cartography’s suggestion for the study of this role.

**Orientalism and the Spatial Turn**

Since its publication in 1978, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* has been an indispensable work for any theoretical intervention that engages in representations of the Middle East in Western culture. In the introduction, he clearly defines the coordinates of his project, explains what he means by Orientalism and his method of addressing it. In a nutshell, Said attempts to show that the set of knowledge created about the Middle East under the rule of the French and the British serves more the goals of the empire than any empirical understanding of the region. It is, therefore, a system of ‘dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (Said, *Orientalism* 3). Taking his methodological cue from Michel Foucault, Said studies a network of texts produced at varied times and discloses the invisible links between these seemingly unrelated texts. Said digs into archives, unearths a large set of texts ranging from well-known novels to obscure
documents, and shows how the commonplace perception of the Orient is largely a textual construction that does not necessarily match what actually happens in the so-called Near East. Given the subject, it is not surprising that geography in general and the concept of ‘place’ in particular play a crucial role in his project. Orientalism, in Said’s view, constructs ‘two geopolitical entities that support and to an extent reflect each other’ (5), and a few pages further, he argues that Orientalism is ‘a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts’ (12). He regards ‘exteriority’ as the foundational concept of Orientalism, and points out that this constructed knowledge originates in the ‘absolute demarcation between East and West’ (39) made possible by discovery voyages and travelers’ accounts.

References to geographical awareness abound in the text, and these continue to emerge in Said’s works in the future in different forms, perhaps most famously in his theory of exile as geographical uprootedness, which functions as a two-edged sword for the exiled person. I will turn to Said’s conceptualization of exile in Chapter Five in discussing Satrapi’s Persepolis. However, despite his genuine interest in the intersection of literature and geography, a rigorous theory of geography is somewhat lacking in his work: ‘In Said’s original contribution, the actual spatial referent of the term Orient – the crucial question of what it encompasses and what it excludes – is barely touched upon’ (Lewis and Wigen 47). There is a simple reason for this: Said was primarily a Foucaudian scholar engaged with literary criticism, not a geographer. In this particular book, as a result, Said is immersed in genealogy. He ferrets out the roots of imperial dominance in archives and makes his point through historical analysis, but his attention to geography as such, as a field that takes account of places and maps, remains sparse and dispersed.

At the time Said was working on Orientalism, his main source of theoretical inspiration, Michel Foucault, was going through a transformative period. Having taken historical genealogy as his main theoretical framework for decades, Foucault was gradually coming to a new conclusion: the making of human geographies is as important as human history, and no study of history is complete without a rigorous geographical contextualization. This shift of axis in his work contributed greatly to the arrival of a crucial moment in geographical studies in particular and in the humanities in general, which was to be called the ‘spatial turn’.
In a considerable shift of gear, in his famous essay ‘Of Other Spaces’, Foucault called history ‘the great obsession of the nineteenth century’, and announced the present time to be ‘the epoch of space’ (Foucault, *Spaces* 22). Towards the end of his life, he grew more and more assertive about the importance of space, and in one of his last interviews, he could not have been clearer: ‘Geography indeed lies at the heart of my concerns’ (Foucault, *Interviews* 77). He did not live long enough to advance the new stage of his intellectual project, but the baton had already been picked up.

Henri Lefebvre is another central figure to this development. Lefebvre’s vast corpus of texts pivots around the introduction of space into Marxist theory, thereby wresting it from the tight grip of historical materialism. He first studied how the expansion of capitalism brought about urban life in *The Urban Revolution*, then moved on to his major theoretical work, *The Production of The Space*, where he lays out his theory of space most comprehensively. Lefebvre argues that the conflict of forces, which Marx tried to track down in history, should be sought in space. Space is the locus of contradictions, not history, and the materialist dialectic occurs in space not time.

Edward Soja, who provides a comprehensive historiography of the so-called ‘spatial turn’, regards Foucault and Lefebvre as the pivotal figures of this moment (Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*). There were of course others who contributed to this change from other perspectives: David Harvey has been exploring the intersections of geography and Marxism since the 1970s, a concern that features greatly in works as early as *Social Justice and the City* and as late as *Rebel Cities*; he explores issues such as the compression of space-time in the context of late capitalism, urban struggle and the distribution of power in urban spaces from multiple perspectives. Michel de Certeau wrote his seminal book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, around the time the ‘spatial turn’ began to gain prominence, and contributed to its development by articulating the intervention of ordinary people in the reconstruction and redefinition of urban spaces, especially the ways in which such interventions produce meaning. His research focuses on the ways in which engaging with space empowers the ordinary people who have almost no say in the organization of the spaces they inhabit. His work is especially useful for the current project, as in all four cases an oppressed or disenfranchised person seeks to manipulate the rigidity of the space to his or her own advantage. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari emerged around the same time with *A Thousand Plateaus*, a book replete with geographical concepts such
as territory, nomadology, desert, earth, zone of proximity, and they articulated the foundations of a sprawling theory that was to be called ‘geophilosophy’. In their work, a plethora of concepts serves as a rich resource for creative articulations of spatial relationships. I make use of these concepts in Chapter Five on *Persepolis* to propose a theory of comic narrative.

The shift towards spatiality was quite significant, given that almost all the thinkers mentioned belong to one or another form of leftism, which traditionally placed the historical above the geographical. Postcolonial studies was born and developed around the same time, and has grown substantially over the last four decades to become a crucial component of this discourse.

*Postcolonial Studies and the Role of Geography*

While Foucault, Lefebvre, Harvey and others were introducing spatial thinking into leftist theories, *Orientalism* was about to give rise to a whole host of thinkers who found a rigorous theoretical grounding in Said’s book. The spatial turn mattered to them too, for geographical considerations lie inevitably at the heart of any form of postcolonial thought. After all, postcolonialism explores a particular relationship between two regions of the world, in which one dominated the other for a considerable amount of time, so no study of this relationship is complete without taking note of maps and distances. Therefore, many postcolonial thinkers, unsurprisingly, take particular conceptions of places and regions as a starting point or as a major preoccupation of their projects. Two of the best-known are Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhaba.

From early on, Spivak was concerned with what she calls ‘worlding’, or more precisely, ‘the worlding of the world on an uninscribed land’ (Spivak 211). This is a concept Spivak borrows from Heidegger’s theory of the origin of the work of art, where, according to Spivak, he accounts for a constitutive battle within a work of art ‘between thrusting world and settling earth’ (212).

Spivak applies this notion to imperialist projects, where the ostensibly uninscribed land discovered by the Europeans is traced on the map of the world and defined in relation to the rest of the map. By activities such as settling, traveling and mapping, the imperialist discourse overwrites the colonized space and engages in the act of ‘worlding’ it.

The best place to look for this ‘worlding’ is travel writing, the stories of Western explorers who waded into unknown territories and, by writing about their journeys, inscribed the newly discovered land onto the map of the world. A persuasive analysis of this seemingly innocuous
enterprise can be found in Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (2004). Drawing upon Derek Gregory’s notion of ‘viewing platforms’ (Gregory, *Imagination*), Pratt discusses what she somewhat whimsically calls ‘the monarch-of-all-I-survey genre’ (201). The epic rhetoric of the Victorian travelogues, particularly when the traveler writes about their ‘discoveries’, has an undiscussed background: the case is always that the locals inform the traveler about an interesting spot in their area, be it a lake or prairie or a mountain, and take them there, so that the traveler can ‘discover’ the place. In travelogues, however, the fact that the place was already known to the local is typically omitted, because the discovery per se is beside the point. The knowledge of the locals is dismissed, since in the traveler’s view, the place:

only gets “made” for real after the traveler (or other survivor) returns home, and brings it into being through texts: a name on a map, a report to the Royal Geographical Society, the Foreign Office, the London Mission Society, a diary, a lecture, a travel book. (204)

Pratt scrutinizes the rhetoric of those travelogues to show how the references to the resourcefulness of the place, as well as the position of the viewer as the master, runs through them. In that sense, the imperial travelogues, despite their benign appearance, heavily engage in what Spivak calls ‘worlding’ of an uncharted territory: producing knowledge around an unknown land, in a way that renders the land part of a particular map already defined and organized by Europeans. Pratt, therefore, concretizes the fairly abstract theories of Spivak by providing a plethora of examples, and clarifies its link to literary representations of the periphery by the Europeans.

A combination of the ways in which ‘worlding’ occurs with the viewpoint of the Western traveler, produces a certain form of knowledge, serve as a the main assumption for this project: here I look at ‘worlding’ done by literary narrative, assuming that the spatial metaphors such as the harem and the patchwork to be discussed in the analyses of *Persian Letters*, *Hajji Baba* and *Persepolis* are depicted through literary narrative to construct a world, and attribute certain features to a place.

Of all these exchanges between geography and the postcolonial, the most interesting is perhaps the evolution of Edward Said’s project from the dominance of historiography in *Orientalism* to the centrality of geographical analysis in *Culture and Imperialism*, which was published fifteen years later. While in *Orientalism* Said largely engaged in a genealogical study of the concept
based on the ways in which orientalism has been constructed through history, here a significant methodological shift takes place and the emphasis is put on geography. He begins the book by pointing out the necessity of ‘expanding’ the Orientalism project, by which he means geographical expansion, to describe ‘general patterns of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories’ (Said, Imperialism xi). Here he pursues locating fictional narratives within empires rather than nations, and detects the geographical awareness in literary narrative, novels in particular, which often exceed what they are purported to be. Foucauldian historiography retreats and gives way to a rigorously geographical enterprise that pays great attention to maps and locations. Culture and Imperialism is guided by this beacon throughout: from Conrad and Kipling, who were acutely aware of the throes of colonialism, to the seemingly timid and limited world of Jane Austin, Said shows how narratives set in an imperial context are inextricably entwined with geography.

Another side of the story of colonialism is of course the resistance of the colonized, since no colonization has ever succeeded unchallenged: ‘never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native. There was always some form of active resistance’ (Said, Culture xii). Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’ is another incarnation of this postcolonial concern with geography and place, which formulates the space of resistance that Said talks about. With the aim of ‘locating’ culture, he defines the third space as a ‘productive space’ rather than a multi-cultural one. In order to overcome the compartmentalization of the cultural space by what he calls ‘Western connoisseurship’, he calls for ‘the intervention of the third space of enunciation’ (37), which refutes any claim to the existence of a unifying culture, and destabilizes the usual processes of meaning-generation and symbolic representation. Rather than a neatly articulated space for symbiosis of cultures, the third space is a locus of clash and fusion.

As mentioned above, the ways in which the books chosen for this project are written prompts one to take account of geography, or in a broader sense, the conceptualization of space and place in each of the narratives. All the books studied here provide a located narrative, in that the actual location of events is of utmost importance in them. Reading these four narratives, we are certainly not in a Tolkienian fantasy world constructed from scratch for the purpose of the story. Nor are we engaging with psychological stories focused primarily on the internal dynamics of characters or a nuanced rendition of complex experience of the passage of time, such as those by
Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. The narratives of the corpus are also different from realist novels, where the portrayal of place also matters, albeit in a different way: a writer like Balzac often wrote about Paris for people who already had some idea about Paris. In this project, however, all four books, fiction and non-fiction alike, make a tacit claim to the introduction of a place to a readership for whom it is largely unknown, and whose introduction to it comes through the narrative. In other words, these books were read and discussed partly because their narratives were set in Iran, and all of them took great pains to introduce this country and to elaborate on its various aspects through storytelling.

One more point must be considered. Talking about experiencing a place, we primarily mean the ways in which the place is seen. This is of course in keeping with fundamentals of geography, since geography is ‘to such an extent a visual discipline that, uniquely among the social sciences, sight is almost certainly a prerequisite for its pursuit’ (Gregory, Imagination 16). We are dealing here with literary narrative, where the act of seeing is carried out by characters. Therefore, in experiencing the place, the perspective from which the place is perceived matters greatly:

The crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not, however, that place is properly something only encountered ‘in’ experience, but rather that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience. (Malpas 31)

Literary narratives rarely present a bird’s eye view of a place, a flat map on which a precise representation is provided according to a well-calculated scale. Literary narrative is not bound to be scientifically accurate. What matters most, perhaps, is the perspective of the narrator or character. In other words, the experience of the character in literary narrative is entangled with the perception of place.

The perception of Iran in these books is no exception. Iran is seen by characters who, in turn, are presented through literary devices. Other Iranian characters also participate and bring in other pieces of the puzzle. In all these books, Iranians have a strong presence and their purported perception of Iran becomes the ground upon which literary narrative in each case constructs an image of Iran. Each book gives plenty of space to its characters, and takes the reader through their discourses and habits, so that after reading each, one comes away with some idea about Iranians. Therefore, it is appropriate that in this project the geographical approach be supplemented with a study of the human presence in the portrayal of place. Such studies have
been conducted in other contexts: in *Room for Maneuver*, Ross Chambers looks at the confined space of prison in Latin American novels to discuss how characters devise various oppositional activities through narrative, in order to survive (Chambers, *Maneuver*). Elsewhere, Jacques Rancière talks about the distribution of the sensible in the public space, and how such an act in itself makes for a powerful coalescence of politics and Aesthetics (Rancière). A substantial part of this project rests on such theories which consider characters inextricable from the space within which they operate. These literary theories, knowingly or unknowingly, are in conversation with a branch of geography in which the human experience of a place plays the central role.

**Humanistic Geography**

In order to understand clearly the literature on humanistic geography, it is necessary to be slightly more technical from the outset and make clear the distinction between space and place. There is not an overarching agreement on the definition of these terms. Michel de Certeau regards place as 'the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence’, which implies stillness and lack of free movement, whereas space ‘exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements’ (Certeau 117), and he tends to favor space over place, since it gives room to freedom and creativity.

By contrast, for other theorists, space is considered an abstract notion, undifferentiated and impervious to being captured in language. It becomes articulated by human intervention, and this turns it into place. The space becomes place ‘as we get to know it better and endow it with human value’ (Tuan 6). So the presence of humans makes the transformation possible: '[places] are all spaces people have made meaningful’ (Cresswell 7). For Yi Fu Tuan, the main term that explains this process is ‘experience’, which denotes all forms of human interactions with the outside world. Experiencing the space and turning it into a place, is one of the first things a child does: understanding the three-dimensional characteristics of space, moving around to explore directions and touch objects. The issue thus comes down to the ways in which the experience of space by a human agent makes a place out of it. Overall, the set of concerns that motivates humanistic geographers is not that varied: they seek to amend the broken bond between human and place by ‘lend[ing] methodological heft to a mode of inquiry that is inherently vulnerable to accusations of impressionism and a lack of scientific rigor’ (Prieto 18). In other words, their
contention with mainstream geography was largely one of method: they objected to the ‘unwarranted application of natural science models to the study of spatial phenomena’ (Lewis and Wigen 12).

The book laid the foundation of humanistic geography was Tuan’s *Space and Place*. His principal idea is that ‘the human being, by his mere presence, imposes a schema on space’ (36). This schema generates meaning, and the analysis of the experiences that produce those meanings becomes the crux of his project. Due to our activities, ‘objects and places are centers of values’ (Tuan 18). The human perspective on place must be captured if one is to understand how the production of knowledge happens, so this notion of place bears little correspondence to maps: ‘The map is God’s view of the world, since its sightlines are parallel and extend to infinity’, whereas ‘the landscape picture, with its objects organized around a focal point of converging sightlines, is much closer to the human way of looking at the world’ (123).

Following this theoretical line of thinking, a study of the spatial construction of Iran in this project includes the tacit suggestion that the perception of the space is interwoven with the perspective from which characters such as Usbek, Hajji Baba, Marji, and Nafisi understand the space they inhabit. Those perspectives, however, could not be equal. Gender plays an important role in those perceptions, and should be incorporated in the discussion. The fact that all the narratives are set in Iran, which is a notoriously patriarchal society to this day, makes the involvement of gender even more necessary.

For the most part, humanistic geography does not take account of gender, and limits itself to underlining a generic human perspective as a countervailing force to a scientific approach. This obviously leaves a gap in the literature, since power relations never allow us to consider male and female perspectives on an equal footing. Feminist geography addresses this shortcoming, and imparts much needed nuance to humanistic geography.

Gillian Rose’s *Feminism and Geography* (1993) is a comprehensive introduction to the feminist intervention into geography. Rose begins with shocking statistics that show geography lags far behind other branches of the humanities with respect to gender equality, being a field thoroughly dominated by men until as recently as the 1990s. Feminists intervene to challenge male dominance, not merely to bring gender balance to the field, but because feminism is in fact deeply concerned with space: it fights against the entrenched duality of public and private
spaces, and addresses the allocation of private space to women while the public has been regarded as the territory of men. According to Rose, feminist geography begins from within this distribution of space, and studies private spaces in geographical terms to show how they are as much the locus of politics as public spaces. Those spaces are studied ‘not merely as an arena in which social life unfolds but as a medium through which social life is produced and reproduced’ (Rose 50). Feminist geographers have carried out numerous sociological studies based on the role of space in constructing social roles. They have then targeted the masculinization of public space: there are many places in every urban environment where women are not welcome, not to mention night spaces, which in most of the world are considered the province of men. Restrictions on the mobility of women, the implicit policing of their bodies, denying them access to large sections of cities, lead ultimately to the need to undertake political action. Feminist geography is, in a sense, the theorization of a global fight for public space, for equal rights to mobility.

Feminist geography is the link that connects this study to gender politics. Of the four chapters, three focus on the ways in which women negotiate, transgress, or construct their spaces: in Persian Letters the circumscribed space of the harem, through the activities of women, turns into a battleground to topple a patriarchal structure. Usbek’s wives make use of their limited resources to put up a fight by altering the rules of the space. In Persepolis, the constant movement of a young woman into spaces denied her leads to a smoothing of the space and blurring boundaries defined by the post-revolutionary government. Perhaps the most intense spatial battle occurs in Reading Lolita, where the private space of the study room becomes a pathway to the world of fiction, into which Nafisi and her students escape in order to survive. Indeed, the comparison between Nafisi’s idea of a private space for a woman of letters with Virginia Woolf’s articulation of the same concept echoes some of the major preoccupations of feminist geography.

The Role of Narrative
Even though humanistic geographers rose against the one-dimensionality of geographical studies, they were susceptible to another form of one-dimensionality: by abandoning a scientific approach they put aside every quantitative study of place, did away with measurement and
objectivity, and overemphasized the subjective, existential aspect of place. There have been attempts to overcome this gap. This brings us to the question of narrative.

There have been efforts to overcome this duality between scientific method and subjective analysis, of which Nicholas Entrikin’s *The Betweenness of Place* is a powerful example. He summarizes the issue as follows:

> From the decentred vantage point of the theoretical scientist, place becomes either location or a set of generic relations and thereby loses much of its significance for human action. From the centred viewpoint of the subject, place has meaning only in relation to an individual’s or a group’s goals and concerns. Place is best viewed from points in between (5).

What is the point in between? Entrikin has a one word proposal: narrative. For him, narrative can mediate the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal. He follows Paul Ricœur’s theory of narrative as a way of drawing things together and forming a totality: ‘in narrative events are given meaning through their configuration into a whole’ (24). Narrative thus enables us to bridge the gap between a merely objective and a purely subjective approach to place. One also ought to consider that ‘explicit in narrative is the fact that it is from a point of view’ (25).

There is always someone, whether fictional or actual, who produces a narrative. If we subscribe to the premise of humanistic geographers that human experience turns a space into a place, then the next step would be figuring out the vehicle by which such experience is conveyed. For Entrikin, narrative is this vehicle.

Entrikin, however, does not elaborate on the kind or coordinates of narrative he considers the best for dealing with place. Others have been more specific. Jeff Malpas, who puts forth a powerful phenomenological theory of place in *Place and Experience*, argues that the idea of inseparability of human and place has been enacted by indigenous people, Australian Aboriginal peoples in particular, whereas in the West it has been taken up by artists, especially novelists:

> the same basic idea of human life as essentially a life of location, of self-identity as a matter of identity found in place, and of places themselves as somehow suffused with the ‘human’, is common to the work of poets and novelists from all parts of the globe and in relation to all manner of landscapes and localities: from Patrick White to Toni Morrison; from William Faulkner to Salman Rushdie. (Malpas 6)
In other words, the deep engagement with the place that was integral to the aboriginal way of life made its way into the modern world via literary narratives. This shows the high importance of literature in the study of places. The role of literature in engaging us with place can be even more fundamental. Literary narratives take on the construction of places as well as representing them, they are able to bring a place into being via words, without carving it out on any real ground, which brings a whole new dimension to the discussion:

Great works of literature have a performative dimension that may rival in importance the kinds of authority attributed to philosophical or scientific discourse. To the extent that they are successful in this task, we can say that these texts do not just reflect attitudes toward existing places; they help to make possible the emergence and establishment of new kinds of places. (Prieto 9)

This makes for an important enrichment of experience: by introducing new places and constructed worlds, literary narratives enrich our world substantially and give us new angles for viewing and perceiving our environments.

In order to conduct a critical assessment of such narratives, one requires a methodology. Geocriticism and literary cartography, one of the most recent achievements of the entanglement of literary theory and spatial theory, can provide the conceptual constellation necessary for such a project.

**Geocriticism: a Brief Overview**

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of ‘chronotope’ seems to be the first organized and rigorous attempt at articulation of a theory of spatiality for literary narrative. Chronotope, or literary time-space, is Bakhtin’s idea for introducing space into literary studies. Influenced by Einstein’s general theory of relativity, Bakhtin articulates his own version of the inextricability of time and space in literary narrative as follows:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin 84)
Among the contemporary thinkers whose work is informed by Bakhtin’s observation, the theoretical take that I will employ in this project has been articulated by Bernard Westphal in *Geocriticism*, and thereafter by Robert Tally in works such as *Spatiality* and the edited volume *Literary Cartographies*. Westphal sets out to make up for the ‘largest deficit in spatiotemporal approaches’, for which literary theory is responsible (26). His main premise is that the imaginary space and the real space cannot be separated, but rather, ‘the one and the other interpenetrate according to a principle of non-exclusion’ (1), so his definition of geocriticism addresses human and imagined spaces in the same breath: ‘geocriticism probes the human spaces that the mimetic arts arrange through, and in, texts, the image, and cultural interactions related to them’ (6). His project, as a result, has strong political implications, since it is indeed about different ways of organizing human spaces, the right to certain spaces and the authority over separating or merging spaces. This shows through the abundant examples of the book, which invokes World War II and concentration camps along with post-war novels. Apart from moving beyond the line between real and imagined space, Westphal is keen on exploring heterogeneity: ‘Geocriticism will work to map possible worlds, to create plural and paradoxical maps, because it embraces space in its mobile heterogeneity’ (73).

Tally has expanded Westphal’s project in several directions, and given it a more practical edge by studying multiple forms of the relationship a literary work may build with a place:

> Literature also functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live. Or maybe literature helps readers get a sense of the worlds in which others have lived, currently live, or will live in times to come. (Tally 2)

Tally goes further and dismantles the very ‘relationship’ between literature and place by considering literary narrative a form of cartography:

> The act of writing itself might be considered a form of mapping or a cartographic activity. Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish. (45)

In other words, for Tally, writing is a form of surveying a territory, picking up pieces of space and weaving them into a narrative. The result of the process is that ‘this narrative makes possible
an image of the world, much like that of a map’ (49). The boundary between the ‘real’ place and the ‘imaginary’ place grows blurred, and literary narrative brings us to deal with, to quote Edward Soja, ‘real-and-imagined places’ (Soja, Thirdspace). Tally calls on Moby Dick’s captain Ahab to bring his point home: in a scene from the novel, we see Ahab looking through various maps to establish his journey’s trajectory. However, what he does is a revision of known maps rather than a calculation based on existing lines. Deploying his vivid imagination, he draws new lines and defines new paths without quite knowing what they lead to, and changes the course of the trip in a dangerous way. To quote Tally: ‘At this moment in the novel, the immense magnitude of the world-system and the enigma of the tragic hero coincide in an explicitly cartographic image’ (Tally 45). This resembles what the mobile characters of this study undertake in the course of their lives: in Hajji Baba and Persepolis, we encounter characters that, often unwittingly, engage in drawing new lines and creating new territories by their movements across separated territories. In that sense, in these two books in particular, a form of mapping takes place in step with the progression of the narrative.

This development of relationships among literary theory, geography and spatiality, culminating in geocriticism and literary cartography, works as the theoretical backbone of this project. I will study the corpus in terms of the ways in which each text operates as a particular literary cartography of Iran, and analyse the result of the construction of the space in each case. We also see that there is no spatial construction without a viewpoint, which makes the role of characters central to the discussion. As the mapping process is being explained, one can follow the characters as they live and work within these spatial constructions, and thereby understand better what they do and why they do it. Thereby I will show the kind of Iran constructed and introduced in each book, as well as a different understanding of Iranian characters of them.

An Overview of the Project
Like other powerful literary narratives, each book occupies a point between two levels of understanding: one is what Tuan called the ‘feel’ of place, here the ‘feel’ of Iran, which tends to be emotional and indirect. The other level makes for a distanced, concrete understanding. The image of Iran as a place each book constructs merges these two levels into one, a whole that contains various, sometimes contradictory, qualities and coordinates. Another duality is also
addressed through such reading. As was discussed in the introduction, a historical and social paradox seems to be inherent in Iran as a geopolitical entity, one that casts an inevitable shadow over every effort to understand the country. Literary narratives, given their tendency to create wholes by bringing ostensibly contradictory ingredients of a phenomenon together, thereby engaging in a process of cognitive mapping, may be a plausible way to account for such situations and make for an elucidation of such dualities and paradoxes.

In each chapter I will also analyze the characters in the books. In each case a varied array of Iranians, fictional or real, are called into being by the story, and each book has plenty to say about them. My argument here is more place-bound than similar studies, in the sense that I study characters in places. Therefore, just as the study of the spatiality will be conducted with the aid of geocriticism and literary cartography, the study of the people of each book will have a geographical component. This reminds us of Westphal’s take on Fernand Braudel’s method of historiography, in which the material elements of the environment play the main role in shaping people’s character: ‘geohistory is also the story of man struggling with his space, fighting against it throughout his hard life of toil and effort’ (Westphal 28). In other words, I argue that the depiction of Iranians, their idiosyncrasies and qualities as a people, in each case is inextricably linked to the way the place is constructed. To translate Braudel’s observation into the realm of literary narrative, characters behave and act in a certain way precisely because they are bound to live and operate in a space that is defined and organized in a certain way by the narrative. Therefore, in each chapter the study of characters emerges from the study of the place.

The books are studied in chronological order of publication, with a chapter devoted to each. Each chapter begins with an introductory section, which provides general information about the storyline, historical context, and the significance of the book in the corpus of literary narratives about Iran. It then analyses the representation of Iran as a place, and I will show the spatial conceptualization of the land that lies at the heart of each literary construction. The third section of every chapter studies characters, primarily the protagonist, in relation to the analysis provided in the previous section, and shows how a certain organization of place in the narrative leads to certain forms of characterization.

The third chapter discusses Montesquieu’s Persian Letters (1721). For almost three centuries, despite the extensive literature on this book, the main assumption about its message has
remained fairly consistent: *Persian Letters* is said to be a rigorous criticism of French values at the time, narrated by two Persian travelers who leave their homeland to equip themselves with Western knowledge and to observe Western culture from within. I begin by challenging this assumption and looking at the book from another angle. Quantitatively speaking, about two-third of the letters written by or to the travelers are explicitly about Persia and the Persians, and the story of the harem is the only thread that holds Montesquieu’s miscellaneous thoughts together. I focus on the Persian parts of the book and tease out the ways an image of Iran is constructed. The harem is a metaphor of sorts that conveys the idea of place, and functions as a microcosm of Persia. In this place, inevitably, the women come to the fore, so I will also analyze the fascinating and somewhat radical depiction of women by Montesquieu in *Persian Letters*.

The fourth chapter explores James Morier’s *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan*. For the English interested in Persia in the nineteenth century, Morier’s work was a crucial text, as it also was for Iranians who read its groundbreaking Persian translation almost half a century later. This chapter first shows how Persia, as a place, is portrayed as a ‘patchwork’, by which I mean a disorderly place with all too precarious boundaries and dangerous risks, and makes it the opposite of *Persian Letters* in terms of spatial construction. This portrayal of place figures in Hajji Baba’s behavior and creates the background for his character as a picaro. This chapter will conclude by talking about the framing story, the narrative in the introduction that sets up the voice of Hajji Baba and makes it conveniently acceptable for Western readers.

Chapter Five deals with Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. Being a graphic memoir, this book is already equipped with a different set of possibilities that distinguishes it from its peers. It thus demands slightly different tools for analysis, ones that take into account its visual aspects. In terms of spatiality, *Persepolis* will be interpreted as an act of mapping, a journey through various sections and parts of Iranian society in order to provide an alternative map, which is being created as the narrator moves from one frame to another. The inclination for leaping from frame to frame manifests itself in Marji’s character as a restless traveler who crosses territories and travels back and forth between Iran and the West. As the spatial study of this book will show, in terms of literary cartography, *Persepolis* bears undeniable resemblances to *Hajji Baba*, and goes down a very similar path in depicting Iran for the Western audience, despite about two centuries gap between the books and their completely different contexts.
Another unexpected similarity between a contemporary text and an early modern one comes through in Chapter Six, dedicated to the study of Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the strikingly polarized literature around this book, and shows how post 9/11 politics affected the reception of this memoir. The study of the literary cartography carried out in *Reading Lolita* shows that Iran in this book is portrayed as a mutilated land, one with insurmountable gaps between different terrains. The narrator and her students take up and describe one of the fragmented pieces of the country, and since their place is so visibly circumscribed, it appears to be more like a harem than an urban space, hence showing a clear similarity to *Persian Letters* in terms of spatial construction. Such divisions lead to extremely polarized characterizations, and the book is populated with characters that fall into rigid categories with barely any contact with each other.

As these summaries show, these books are considerably different from each other in so many ways, which leads to quite different constructions. However, by adopting a more flexible theoretical approach that guides us across historical periods, one sees that the ways in which literary cartography has been done by authors has not fundamentally changed over the centuries, and the literary texts of our time understand the spatiality of Iran in ways considerably similar to the texts devoted to Persia. Nonetheless, I have no intention of emerging with a unifying conclusion as to how a certain image of Iran has been repeated through the centuries. That being said, one thing that they all have in common emerges, and this is a significant engagement with the inevitable ambiguity that lies at the core of Iran as a place and Iranians as a people, and the striking similarities among the answers these texts provide.
Chapter Three
The Harem as a Microcosm: The Persian side of Persian Letters

Over almost three centuries since the first publication of Persian Letters, there have been at least two points accepted by most of the people who have written about it. First, many, including Montesquieu himself, have pointed out that the book is somewhat lacking in coherence. Second, the story is often summarized as a sharp criticism of the French society of the time, expressed through the point of view of two naïve Persian men, Usbek and Rica.

The novel covers Usbek’s travel to France which begins in 1711 and ends in 1720. Usbek, a legal cleric highly disillusioned with the court system in Persia, sets out to discover the wonders of Paris with his friend Rica. He leaves behind his harem in Isfahan, and hands over his wives to the care of a group of eunuchs who work for him. The book consists of letters Usbek and Rica write to and receive from Persia, in which they talk about topics as varied as Christianity and its role in French politics, theology and the afterlife, and everyday life in the harem. Over time, however, a crisis in the harem gradually evolves, ultimately leading to the toppling of Usbek’s household and the suicide of his favorite wife.

As the first work of a young writer who was to become one of the founders of modern political science, Persian Letters created a sensation when it was published in 1721. Such a scathing, sometimes derisive, view on French culture by a Frenchman was not common at the time. The exchange between Usbek and Rica and their contacts in Persia is comprised of 161 letters that cover a vast range of issues and that seemingly follow no particular storyline. Montesquieu felt compelled to broach this lack of coherence in a short text he wrote thirty years after the first publication of Persian Letters. He claims that there is ‘a secret chain which remains, as it were, invisible’ (Montesquieu, Letters 283), one that holds all the letters together.

This ‘secret chain’, however mysterious and profound it sounds, might well be nothing more than an idle boast by a writer under pressure to explain why the narrative thread of his novel is so tenuous. In this short introduction he does not go into details, which makes his claim all the more ambiguous. Nonetheless, the idea of the ‘secret chain’ has been taken seriously, likely more seriously than Montesquieu himself intended. The considerable scholarship around finding this ‘secret chain’ suggests the extent to which readers have felt the need to establish some sort of
coherence in this book. In one case, the chain is decoded as an attack on self-interest (Swaine). Sexual politics, that is, bringing sexuality into the political realm, is another explanation, since Usbek’s hold on his harem is, after all, largely driven by erotic desires, which come through in a significant number of letters (Schaub). The chain is also identified as a comprehensive criticism of religion in all its forms and shapes (Kessler).

This chapter, in a sense, is another attempt to unravel the alleged secret chain, except that I will argue that the mysterious secret chain is not so secret. Rather, it seems that a simple change of perspective reveals the thread that strings all these letters together. If we abandon the established version of the storyline, and read the book by paying closer attention to the text, rather than the context within which this epistolary novel has usually been perceived, *Persian Letters* can be read as a story of Persia narrated from the point of view of two Persian expatriates, rather than a scathing criticism of French society through the eyes of two Persian travelers. In adopting this approach, we will find plenty of clues as to how the chain works.

In breaking away from the traditional reading of this text and adopting a new perspective, we will see how the novel is organized, and thereby how the pieces of it are connected. Such an endeavor is partly dependent on reading the book as a novel, which may sound like stating the obvious, since a novel is what this book was meant to be, even though this is not the term Montesquieu used to describe it until years later.

However, too often *Persian Letters* has been read as a compendium of ideas Montesquieu laid out in order to further develop them later (Hundert and Nelles), or as a disguised treatise in critique of religious fanaticism (Memarsadeghi), or again as an attempt to propagate cosmopolitanism (Lloyd). Overall, his career as a political philosopher seems to have overshadowed *Persian Letters*, and the literariness of the book tends to be neglected. In this chapter, I follow the path opened by Paul Valéry, who, in his well-known introduction, treated *Persian Letters* as a fictional world of ideas, rather than a treatise, and argued that the importance of this book should not be sought in the ideas it puts forth, but rather in ‘the subterfuges of ideas, and the confusion created by their interplay’ (Valéry 210). Valéry’s point might sound like hair-splitting, but the precise difference he points out sets the ground for a reading that refuses to reduce the book to its political or social ideas solely on the basis of its writer’s career. Such an irreducibility must be noted duly throughout the work.
Montesquieu himself was skeptical of calling *Persian Letters* a novel in the beginning, but when he wrote ‘Some reflections on *The Persian Letters*’ (Montesquieu, *Letters* 283), three decades later, he could not be clearer. He writes that he is willing to please the public by an epistolary novel. It is worth noticing that what we often read as *Persian Letters* is a revised version Montesquieu provided in 1754 along with ‘Some Reflections on *Persian Letters*’. Thirty-three years after the first publication of the book, still drunk on its success, Montesquieu fancied another surge of popularity and edited the book again in order to make it more ‘novelistic’. In doing so, he focused on the harem part of the story: ‘In adjusting the order of the letters and supplementing it with new letters that reinforced the plot-line, Montesquieu aimed to realign his fiction with new conventions and to underscore the drama of the seraglio’ (Kahn xviii). The version of *Persian Letters* usually read today is this 1754 edition, in which Montesquieu added eleven letters, all concerning the drama in the harem.

Before turning to details, let me reiterate the main point of this chapter: in order to decipher the complexities of this book, including ‘the secret chain’, a geopolitical sensitivity needs to be imparted to the argument, and *Persian Letters* should be read as a book as much about Persia as it is about France, if not more so. Therefore, the letters devoted to matters Persian must be taken as seriously as the ones discussing France, and analyzing them will reveal the image of Persia constructed in this novel.

*From the Point of view of the Unaware*

As discussed above, the most commonplace interpretation holds that *Persian Letters* outlines Montesquieu’s still undeveloped ideas on politics and society, and in doing so, sheds light on French society through the inexperienced eyes of two foreigners. Those foreigners, therefore, have often been regarded as devices rather than characters, lenses through which one looks at French society. This notion about Montesquieu’s characterization appears over and over again in summaries of the story. Lucas Swaine introduces Usbek and Rica as two Persians who ‘spend a fair amount of time in Paris, making careful observations and subsequently writing about their various experiences’ (Swaine 87), even though Usbek’s observations of Paris make up a rather small part of his correspondence. The story of the harem is put aside, and Swaine’s study indicates that the details Montesquieu provides on the Persian side of the story function only as necessary information for constructing a plausible background for the characters. In another
study, even though cosmopolitanism is the focus, the book is described as ‘a satire on contemporary European politics and morals’ (Lloyd 480), with no suggestion that about one third of it is devoted to the stories of Usbek’s harem. In a biography of Montesquieu, after a fairly extensive account of life in Persia as recounted in the novel, another writer comes to this curious conclusion: ‘When one has finished Persian Letters, it becomes reasonably clear that Persia has relatively little to do with the book’ (Loy 46).

Let us imagine a naive reader who comes across this book contingently, and knows nothing about Montesquieu, Persia or France, or the eighteenth century. This hypothetical person is able to read French but has no knowledge of the context in which Persian Letters was produced. An interesting thought exercise could be based on this hypothesis: if this person read the book, how would s/he summarize its story? With no knowledge of the context or the literature about this text, she would most probably pay attention to matters discussed the most in the book. First of all, the cover of the book tells us that something ‘Persian’ is happening, so from the start, the hypothetical reader will keep that in mind. In a book like Persian Letters, which follows many threads simultaneously and keeps shifting gear to the very end, our reader might well estimate the importance of characters and situations according to the frequency of their appearance in the text. If we imagine ourselves in her shoes and do the quantification, we will see that of the 161 letters in the book, 120 letters are written to or by Usbek, and the rest to or by Rica and occasionally other characters, which means that our reader should take Usbek as the protagonist of Persian Letters, and thus pay special attention to his concerns. As I will show in the next section in some detail, Usbek is virtually indifferent to French society. Almost all the observations on the French lifestyle come from Rica, while Usbek is preoccupied with the troubles he has left behind in his household. Usbek’s French meditations are largely inextricable from his Persian ones, and he scarcely departs from his comparative perspective to focus on the French society independently.

Furthermore, among 120 letters related to Usbek, 36 are written by or to people in his harem in Isfahan, all about his wives and the ways he prefers to run his private space. This number makes up about one-third of his correspondence, which suggests the centrality of the harem story in the book. The distribution of those letters is also noteworthy: of the first ten letters, six are entirely about the harem, largely focusing on the impact his departure makes on his wives. More interestingly, all the last fifteen letters of the book are also about the harem, in particular the riot
Usbek’s wives mount there, which leads to the suicide of his favorite wife and the ultimate collapse of the harem. Between the entirely Persian beginning and ending, the rest of the book is interspersed with other letters related to Usbek’s Persian matters. Therefore, for someone who knows nothing about the background of the book and the way it has been presented, it is perfectly plausible to take *Persian Letters* to be a story about Persia, starting with an episode in a harem and ending with another one, along with a variety of meditations on France, where the characters live in the course of the novel. So, our hypothetical reader, having been asked to summarize the novel she has read, may well emerge with an account along the lines of the following: *Persian Letters* is a book about Persia, narrated from the point of view of two Persians who migrate to France, and look back on their homeland from a distance, trying to understand it better, while reflecting on French society and its politics as a point of comparison.

As radical a revision as this summary might sound, it was actually the narrative to which the first reviewers of the book subscribed. They were surprised by the Persians’ manner of speaking, and believed that Montesquieu intended, above everything, to identify with his exotic creatures:

[The reviewers] were sure that […] he [Montesquieu] was only playing ‘outsider’. In fact he had made himself a double outsider, first as a Persian in Paris, and then as that same man at home in his exotic harem. To make oneself at home in a strange society and a foreigner in one's own is itself an assertion of imaginative freedom (Shklar 32).

For a fairly long time, according to Judith Shklar, the comic nature of the book was the centre of attention, and people often read it as a humorous novel. It was Michelet who criticized the view of *Persian Letters* as a ‘light’ novel, and brought people’s attention to the bitter side of it, such as the horror and oppression unfolding in the harem, and the serious nature of discussions over political and social debates taking place throughout the book (Shklar 33).

Apart from the number of Persian affairs covered in the book, there are other links that connect *Persian Letters* to Persia. Montesquieu conducted intensive research on the Orient in general and Persia in particular. He read many travelogues and letters written to and from the region by Westerners, and was greatly influenced by Jean Chardin’s and Jean Baptist Tavernier’s accounts. Moreover, Montesquieu was interested in French-Persian affairs to the degree that he noticed and commented on the presence of the first Persian envoy to France:
As an envoy of the Safavid Shah, he [the envoy] reached Paris in February 1715, but skeptics like Montesquieu viewed him as an impostor. As a locus of public attention, Muhammad Riza Bayg was indeed a source of inspiration for Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (Tavakoli-Targhi 40).

There are ample facts that show that Persia for Montesquieu was not merely a place to conjure up as the home country of his characters. There is another book, moreover, that Montesquieu read and knew well, yet its influence has not been discussed duly: *A Thousand and One Nights*. Antoine Galland’s so-called ‘translation’ of *The Nights* began to appear in 1704, and went on until 1717 when all the twelve volumes were available. Europeans of the early 18th century were not unfamiliar with Oriental tales. Travelers and merchants had already started sending letters home and publishing travel accounts, and the Quran, which was translated to French in 1683, was a widely-read text in the early years of the eighteenth century. But Galland’s work came as a turning point. The English translation was published shortly after the first volume and ran in parallel in England. In both countries this book of Oriental tales became a cult phenomenon: ‘oriental fever swept through the salons and coffee houses, the broadsheet publishers and the theatrical impresarios; the book fired a train of imitations, spoofs, turqueries, oriental tales, extravaganzas, pantomimes, and mauresque tastes in dress and furniture’ (Warner 53).

Montesquieu was deeply immersed in the cultural milieu of the time and certainly knew *The Nights*. The choice of Isfahan as the birthplace of his characters also suggests this familiarity, since among Persian cities of the time, Isfahan figures most prominently in *The Nights*. The influence of *The Nights* has been pointed out before, often in passing (De Groot; Spencer; Shackleton), but I argue that the Orientalist side of *Persian Letters* is not simply a colour or added flavor to excite the Western reader. Rather, this is the influence that determines the structure of *Persian Letters*. The fragmented nature of *Persian Letters* has been attributed to a number of causes, for instance the significant influence of Montaigne, whom Montesquieu greatly admired (Kahn).

Let us take, for example, the beginning of both books. *The Nights* begins with the story of the devastating violence Prince Shahriar wreaks on the women of the town: having been cuckolded by his wife, he exacts revenge on other women by forcing them into his harem, spending one night with them, and killing them before dawn. Shahrazad risks becoming the next victim, and
therefore she launches a long series of tangled stories that go on for a thousand more nights, so as to cajole the prince into peace. *Persian Letters* begins by the story of Usbek abandoning his wives, leaving them in emotional agony at the mercy of cruel and resentful eunuchs. Just as Shahrazad embarks on a storytelling journey to restrain the master of the harem, Usbek’s wives begin to put together plans for emancipating themselves from the tight grip of their new masters. Both books then take on an episodic form: in *The Nights*, a slew of stories is unleashed, which sometimes are told in parallel, sometimes intertwine and spiral, tangle and untangle. Perhaps the only point in the book that keeps harking back to the initial plot is the end of each night, when Shahrazad’s silence at dawn marks the end of the episode. Similarly, in *Persian Letters* the intellectual digressions into other matters begins when the background story of the harem is set. After that, Usbek and Rica put down their wandering thoughts on paper and send them to their friends and wives, so the book turns into a collection of philosophical and political fragments with no apparent connection to each other, just as the stories of *The Night* tend to appear disjointed. Similarly to *The Nights*, *Persian Letters* is structured by intermittent letters to and from the harem, which hark back to the opening story. The structure of both narratives is too similar to dismiss as mere coincidence.

Having shown that the Persian part of the book is more important than usually appreciated, in this chapter I will concentrate specifically on this underestimated aspect. In order to do so, I will analyze those letters that focus on Persian matters in order to explore the way in which Montesquieu constructed Persia in *Persian Letters*. Primarily, two matters will be discussed: first, studying the spatiality of Persia so as to determine how the harem as a space is represented, and the qualities and coordinates of this constructed space. Second, in analyzing the Persian characters of the book and the way in which they relate to each other within the particular space of the harem, I will explore how Persians, and Persian women in particular, are portrayed in the course of the book, and how they resist Usbek’s tyranny by manipulating the established power structure to their advantage.

*The Unexpected Complexities of the Harem*

Montesquieu was well aware of the role of geography in shaping nations, so much so that he has been considered one of the founding figures of environmental determinism, according to which human behavior is ineluctably bound up with the environment within which humans live. This is
the theory he developed fully in *The Spirit of Law*, where he argued that the environmental elements of each culture determine the type of government and social fabric they will have. He preached looking down to the soil and around to the environment rather than up into the heavens in order to understand a society, and thereby to perceive what constitutes the spirit of laws for different peoples:

They should be related to the physical aspect of the country; to the climate, be it freezing, torrid, or temperate; to the properties of the terrain, its location and extent; to the way of life of the peoples. (Montesquieu, *Spirit* 8)

Montesquieu believed if one could establish such features, then ‘the laws will be seen to flow from it’ (8), since geography and environment determine everything. Predictably, he talks about Persians in *The Spirit of Laws* and unabashedly expresses his low opinion of them. His geography is based on a total separation between Europe and Asia, so he sees no obstacle in polarizing those continents into moderns and barbarians. The barbarism he ascribes to Persians, however, stems from the limits their geography imposes upon them. As an example, he attacks the law of absolute power of the king in Persia, the fact that the life and death of everyone is entirely in the hands of the king. He hastens to say that this is not a new development, as it follows the same legal iron fist that the ancient Persians lived under, thus it inevitably emanates from their environment and might well continue to be the case forever.

Montesquieu’s ideas in *The Spirit of Laws* shed light on *Persian Letters*, even though in terms of the construction of Persia, those ideas are partly at odds with *Persian Letters*. They are, however, important to mention, since in retrospect, the kind of ‘place’ Persia was must have mattered greatly for Montesquieu. After all, *Persian Letters* is, to a great extent, a comparative study, and given that he was so bent on taking account of environmental elements in his comparisons, he would have taken pains to depict the place that Persia was as accurately as he could. His concern with providing a reliable portrayal of the environment prompted him to study travelogues and consciously defy the widespread demand for exotic Oriental fictions.

At the time Montesquieu embarked on the composition of *Persian Letters*, the number of travelogues he could rely on was small. The best-known accounts, which became Montesquieu’s sources, were Jean Chardin’s *Journeys in Persia* and Jean Baptiste Tavernier’s *Six Journeys in Turkey, in Persia and in the Indies*. He drew upon these two accounts considerably, but chose a
path different from that of Chardin and Tavernier. While those travelogues are replete with details of life in Persia, the behavior of people, the characteristics of the soil and landscape, and its fruits and animals, Montesquieu decided to hold onto one particular space and look at Persia through this circumscribed environment in which Usbek’s wives while away the time while waiting for the return of their husband-master. The scattered descriptions the travelogues provided for him were consummately processed and distilled into a set of features which Montesquieu ascribed to the harem.

Leila Ahmed has shown that the Western perception of the harem took a significant turn after the publication of a remarkable travelogue by Mary Wortley Montagu. She was the wife of the British ambassador to Turkey at the time, and travelled over with her husband in 1716. She was immediately fascinated with the harem and, being a woman, managed to gain access to the innermost corners of the life in the harems of Istanbul. Her depiction of harem life runs against the commonplace erotic fantasy promulgated by Western men who had actually never seen the inside of a harem, but conveniently projected their sexual fantasies onto that space. In Montagu’s view, ‘Wealthy Muslim women owned and controlled their properties even when married. They were thus much better placed and had less to fear from their husbands than their sisters in the Christian world’ (Ahmed 525). Her detailed account, ranging from the domestic economy and politics of the harem to women’s hobbies and bathing rituals, shattered the deep-seated stereotypes about this space and prompted people to look into it with more precision and fewer assumptions. The fascinating fact is that the same woman was the strongest supporter of Montesquieu’s depiction of the harem in Persian Letters: ‘Montesquieu, in his Persian Letters, has described the manners and customs of the Turkish ladies as well as if he had been bred up among them’ (Shackleton 33). This remark alone is sufficient for taking the image of the harem in Persian Letters seriously.

It is striking that, although most of the novel takes place in Persia, the characters are never seen outside the harem. On only one occasion throughout the book do they leave the building, and what happens differs little from their everyday life under the Eunuchs’ sway: one of Usbek’s wives, Zachi, writes to him to describe their first and only picnic in the course of the book. The women, she writes, ‘set out for the country, where we hoped to have greater freedom’ (103). As they mount the camel, the chief eunuch decides to reduce to zero the risk of them being leered at: ‘to the cloth which prevented us from being seen he added a curtain so thick that we were

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completely unable to see anyone’ (103). In order to pass the river, they are put into boxes, and even when a storm comes and the river is turbulent they are not allowed out. In other words, in the only scene where things happen outdoors, the women are essentially moved from one box to another. Even the outdoors is turned into a harem-like space, so that our understanding of Persia remains limited to this space throughout the book. That is to say, the harem is the space that contains all we are supposed to learn about Persia, so it takes on the role of a microcosm.

The idea of the harem as a microcosm has been raised before:

Montesquieu implies that the seraglio is a microcosm of the Biblical world. The relationship between the master of the seraglio and his women is analogous to the marriage relationship sanctioned by the three Biblical religions, the political relationship between ruler and ruled in theocratic regimes, and, finally, the union between the Biblical deity and the faithful. (Kessler 383)

Religion is certainly a crucial part of the book, but is by no means Montesquieu’s main concern. After all, as Ahmed argues, the harem was mostly a projection of the fantasies of European men on an unknown entity, in which, as they imagined, all the exciting vices forbidden in Europe, such as lesbianism and polygamy, were permissible. Montesquieu was also projecting his own ideas, but his projections concerned his understanding of a political system and a lifestyle as a whole. His attitude in this book is far more holistic than studying religious oppression or indulging in fantasies about lesbianism, with the effect that the harem becomes a comprehensive image of Persia. The harem takes on the function of microcosm and entails Persia as a whole, rather than merely one aspect or another of the country. A close study of the harem in general and the way it is presented in the book will help us understand the spatial construction of Iran in Persian Letters.

As a space, the harem is a far more complex phenomenon than it has been perceived to be: ‘a space, such as the harem, is experienced as a series of active spatial relations that are always socially situated and formative of social dynamics’ (Lewis 178). To understand these dynamics, one has to take into account the context of the Islamic world, in which the duality of private-public was perceived very differently from in Europe. To begin with, one should shed the idea of the obsession with sexuality in the harem. Feminist scholars (Kuehn, Mabro, Melman) have recently studied travelogues and accounts of Western women who visited harems in the Middle
East after Montagu’s groundbreaking travelogue, and they provided a very different image from the ones men provided, corroborating Montagu’s description. These accounts have been marginalized for decades, even centuries, seemingly only because they were written by women, and yet European women had access to the harem and experienced first-hand this space, which European men knew only superficially from a distance. It took time for Western scholars to abandon the clichés created by European men and listen to the Turkish feminist, Halide Edib, who demanded that her fellow European feminists ‘delete forever that misunderstood word ‘harem’, and speak of us in our Turkish ‘homes’. Ask them to try and dispel the nasty atmosphere which a wrong meaning of that word has cast over our lives’ (Lewis 13). In recent decades, it has been shown convincingly that the harem, if put duly in context, on so many occasions has provided the possibility of agency for women, a space in which they can wield political influence. That seems to be Montesquieu’s understanding of this space as well.

*Persian Letters* is set in Isfahan under the Safavid dynasty, and the harems there were no exception in terms of their complexity. In the harems of Isfahan ‘women develop[ed] friendships and share intimate relationships, some of which would have formed the basis for political unions’ (Babayan 372). The Safavid women were particularly keen on political engagement. They would form complex alliances and influence the court, usually in matters such as bringing their own children to the attention of the ruler.

Such complexities barely appear in the bulk of Western narratives, be they fictional or non-fictional. Montesquieu, however, seems to be an exception. Despite being written in the early phase of Oriental stories, and with a meager number of sources on the harem available at the time, Montesquieu manages to construct and narrate a complex space in which politics, eroticism, and culture are entangled and mutually influential.

In *Persian Letters*, Usbek’s wives are of course the main figures of the harem, but they are not its only inhabitants. In fact, the first comprehensive story of life in the harem is told by a eunuch. It is an isolated case, as many pieces in the book are, but is nevertheless important to understand the spatial distributions in the harem. The chief eunuch of Usbek’s harem tells the story of painful sexual oppression. In a bleak letter to a young colleague, he recounts a lifetime struggle with his desire which has transformed into an intractable hatred of women. Now that he is in charge after the departure of the master, he finds himself trapped in a new space: he is both ruler
and inferior at the same time, and he has to take on the paradoxical task of maintaining order ruthlessly and satisfying all the demands of the women. His life is but a series of frustrations and suffocations. His sexual desire, however, seems to be an undying force which drives him forward, even in his old age, in the hope of realization. This turns out to be a feeling shared by many in the harem: among both the eunuchs and the women, almost everybody suffers from unfulfilled sexual desires, which corroborates the previous claim that, for Montesquieu, the hedonistic significations of the harem were incidental.

Usbek is the only one who benefits from this oppressive regime, since he is the only person in the story whose desires come true if the existing oppressive system works well. For others, including the eunuchs, the confines of the harem are something to overcome. That is the reason Usbek, throughout the book, pursues new strategies to restrict the space. Like many others bent on exercising brutal control, he sanctifies the space, and his terminology becomes one of transgression and a staining of the holy space. This manifests itself in his letter to Zashi, one of his wives, who dares to allow one of the eunuchs into her room. In his letter, Usbek acknowledges that the eunuch is not exactly a man, so the allegations about sexual infidelity are likely to be baseless. He also admits that his wife will never lower herself to the level of having intercourse with eunuchs ‘because of their incomplete resemblance to men’ (67). So the question is not exactly one of sexual faithfulness. However, Usbek considers his wife as unfaithful, since he sees unfaithfulness in terms of spatiality: ‘how could you have broken the bolts and doors which keep you locked in?’ (67), ‘what more would you do if you could get out of that holy place’ (68, my emphasis). He envies Roxane, his favorite wife, for living ‘in the home of innocence’ (75), and while he warns one of his wives that ‘you should be grateful for the restraints that I impose on you’ (68), in another letter to another wife he takes pity on European women who ‘have lost all restraint’ (76).

The women also understand their lives in spatial terms. As her child reaches a certain age, one of the wives, Zelis, asks Usbek for permission to move her into the inner premises of the harem, because ‘it is never too early to deprive a young girl of the freedom of childhood and bring her up in sanctity between these sacred walls where chastity resides’ (128). This is the time when peace still reigns. As the tension rises, however, the very space where ‘chastity resides’ becomes a prison, and the women’s struggle for freedom becomes tantamount to breaking out of the space of the harem: they take off their veils outdoors, sneak out to the countryside, touch strangers.
The battle women wage ultimately boils down to a fight over the definition of the harem as a space, or rather, the discourse in which the space is understood: Usbek does his best to keep imposing religious terms of restriction upon it, and the women turn this upside down. In the last letter of the book, Roxane, Usbek’s favorite wife, before taking her own life, announces the victory of women in changing the discourse: ‘[I] managed to turn your terrible seraglio into a place of delightful pleasures’ (280). It could be argued that her suicide marks the futility of resisting the patriarchal structures, but given the status of Roxane among Usbek’s wives, her suicide amounts to more than that. She is a very important character in Persian Letters, although she does not appear that often in the course of the novel. Usbek seems to genuinely love her and respect her more than his other wives. Due to her status, her suicide, which occurs at the very end of the novel, carries a symbolic value: this is the last blow to Usbek’s tenuous sway over his harem. The death of Roxane concludes the novel, because her suicide takes away from Usbek what he considers his most precious ‘property’.

The battle of Usbek with his wives is ultimately one of spatial control. The harem is the central space of the book, a pivot around which the whole politics of the Persian part of the novel turns. As a result, it becomes a microcosm of the society as a whole, and one can trace various power struggles taking place within it: women make alliances and break them apart, eunuchs pursue a balance between fulfilling the role of master’s surrogate and indulging in their own sexual fantasies, and Usbek struggles to come to an efficient combination of soft and hard power. The harem becomes the locus of this all, a space for politics and grabbing power, rebellion and oppression, and emblem of the Oriental despotism Montesquieu talks about later in The Spirit of Laws. In other words, rather than reducing this space to exotic eroticism as many others did, he regards it as a battleground wherein a ruler keen on control and restriction faces the subjugated women who aspire for liberation, and thereby creates many layers in a seemingly simple place.

_Hanging on the Brink: Joys and Ordeals of the People of the Harem_

In letters that involve the Persian parts of the story, three kinds of people appear: the master, the wives and the eunuchs. The harem is the scene upon which all these relationships take form or fall apart. This nexus of connections constructs a network of power which, as often happens in any system of power, generates a subtle but serious battle over dominance which lies at the heart of the harem drama in Persian Letters.
The master is Usbek, who owns the harem. He is also practically the owner of the women living there. We have no information how the harem was run in his presence, but the letters suggest that his authority until his travel to France was scarcely challenged, and everything followed his desire. Then there are the women, who were treated as property under Usbek’s reign. It seems that before Usbek’s departure, they had virtually no agency and were hardly anything more than tools used by Usbek to fulfill his sexual and emotional demands. Usbek has managed to exert absolute but subtle authority over their bodies and souls. Then there are the eunuchs, who fill the space between the master and his wives. They run errands for the women and function as the master’s controlling arm. They traditionally hold great power because of their unique intermediary position, something which is reflected in Persian Letters. Due to this in-between-ness, both the master and the women oscillate between absolute trust and sheer distrust of them, depending on the occasion.

The deep uncertainty brewing under the quiet surface of the harem makes for a sophisticated nexus of roles in the tense environment created by Usbek’s departure. The drama begins when the master leaves the harem and decides to rule over it from afar. His absence inevitably leaves a power vacuum and alters all the equations in the harem: women are no longer totally subordinate, eunuchs take on a new role as oppressors, the master has no direct command over anything. This all can happen precisely because, along with the story of these tensions, the harem as a flexible space is being constructed as those events are unfolding. Persian Letters, therefore, is essentially a study of the formation of a new power structure in an unconventional space, an attempt to show how an enclosed power system imposed on a subjugated people is breakable.

In the previous section it was explained how the space is divided among inhabitants of the harem, and how their interests pull them towards or apart each other, which makes for a dynamic distribution of space through the novel. To understand what characters do, we also need to see their place in the network of power described above, through a study of the ways in which they build up relationships. I will put Rica aside in this section, since he barely mentions Persia. He is there to report on France, and will be called on in the next section to give us the point of comparison necessary to understand the book as a whole. Instead, I will look at Usbek and his wives as two ends of the spectrum, as well as the eunuchs who are in-between.
Let us begin with Usbek. He is a well-off man, well-respected in the community, who holds a high ranking job in the court as a legal advisor of sorts, and a large dynamic harem under his sway. For such a character, there must be a strong reason to abandon this enviable life and head for a foreign country. The reason is explained early on. He reveals to his friend that he could not come to terms with the widespread corruption in the court. He has to decide to maintain his integrity or go along with the status quo. He opts for the former (48). It follows that, from the outset, he is a rather reluctant traveler. His reluctance surfaces in most of his letters: ‘my health, as it grows worse, takes me back to my country, and makes this one seem more alien’ (78), ‘I am in the midst of a profane people’ (62). He fails to be assimilated in the new country, and always looks back on his homeland. Apart from his engagements with developments in the harem, he is also intellectually tied to Persia. He writes lengthy letters to prominent theologians, raising technical issues about Islamic theology, ranging from the reason behind the prohibition of pork to the possible events on judgment day, and he reveals a keen interest in comparing Islam with Christianity.

The more Usbek stays in Paris, the more engaged with spirituality he becomes, and thus more distanced from the relatively secular French society of the time: ‘you would never have imagined that I had become more of a metaphysician than I was already, but such is the case’ (144). In parallel with the strengthening of his spiritual disposition, he grows increasingly uninterested in the French lifestyle. He castigates the French for their careless consumption of wine, and for what he sees as the corrupting freedom which French society bestows on women. Divested of his corporeal pleasures, his only solace is the gathering of knowledge. He writes several lengthy letters comparing political and legal systems in different countries, and towards the end of the book those scholarly interests grow stronger, to the point that over the last third of the book he is steeped in his research and ceases to grumble about France. The harem is of course the only thing he cannot put behind him, and its complicated developments stay with him to the very last letter of the book. Overall, it is fair to say that Usbek’s main quality is his desperation. He is quite a sad character who has thrown himself into a new world, whose power is on the wane at home while his new place does not welcome him with open arms. A brief survey of his journey through the book reveals that he is anything but an astute observer of French society, as he has often been perceived to be. Persia is his first and foremost preoccupation all the way through, and his reflections on France barely exceed superficial complaints.
The women are of course the basis of the harem, and determine the way the story of the harem unfolds. Whatever Usbek does in the course of the book is in reaction to their activities. Upon his departure, the women immediately start showering Usbek with letters. They all appear to be angry at his abrupt decision, but the ways in which they express their anger are far more strategic than superficial complaints. Their expression of fury is tailored to their aspirations, which turn out to be the expansion of their range of movement and achieving basic freedoms. This is all meant to be achieved unbeknownst to Usbek, but he indicates several times that he has an inkling of what his wives have in mind. In a letter to his intimate friend, Nassir, he writes: ‘I see a troop of women virtually left to themselves; I have only men of debased souls to answer for them’ (46), which bodes ill for the future of the harem. His militarized language indicates that he anticipates some form of battle, although he could not have predicted how grave this battle will become.

In fact, the battle is waged soon after he leaves. The very first letters the women send to him are bitter and threatening in their own way. The threat is often mixed with expressions of love, sometimes tantalizing comments about the time they spent with Usbek. Fatme’s letter is a good example: she starts with admiration for Usbek’s masculinity: ‘I swear, I should choose no one but you’, then threateningly implies that, despite her burning love, she will not curb her feelings: ‘you must not think that your absence has made me neglect my desire’. She strengthens the rhetoric towards the end of the letter, calls him cruel and blames him for his selfishness: ‘you treat us as if we had no feelings’ (47). A very similar ambivalence runs through most of the letters written to Usbek from the harem. They flatter Usbek at one moment and censure him the next, they elevate him to the status of the ultimate lover and then crush him with poisonous attacks. By paying attention to the tone, one can discern signs of a concerted effort by the women to sap Usbek’s authority by manipulating his emotions.

The first serious strike to Usbek’s power comes with the first scandal. Usbek is informed that one of his wives has had an affair with a eunuch. He criticizes his wife for breaching the holy boundaries within the harem and staining its sanctity. He is still blind to that side of the story which relates to distribution of power, and tends to see everything in a sexual light, even though he uses spatial terms. It takes him a while to appreciate the complexity of what his wives are doing, and when he does, he has already lost control: ‘I am told the seraglio is in disorder’, and softens his rhetoric to persuade his wives to remain faithful: ‘for I would like you to forget that I
am your master and remember only that I am your husband’ (133). That change of tone marks
the first victory of the women, but they continue their struggle and keep painting Usbek into a
corner until the ultimate collapse of the harem occurs.

The letters of the women have often been discussed as one body of texts, and that is why the
complexity of their way of dealing with the absence of the master is often underrated. Diana
Schaub does a helpful job in breaking down the letters to their respective writers as individuals,
also taking into account the dates of the letters. In doing so, the portraits of individual characters
come to light, and their intentions and plans become more noticeable. By separating out their
letters, it turns out that Zachi writes the most tantalizing letters and is bent on wantonness and
pleasure more than the others. Roxane is the one Usbek loves the most, and yet she writes less
than others. She is mysteriously silent and deceives her husband along the way, only to appear at
the end of the book with the strongest attack on Usbek, declaring the collapse of the harem and
informing him of her suicide. Zelis is probably the quietest one, who seems to have a covert
lesbian relationship with Zachi. Fatme and Zephis also demonstrate distinct characters. Schaub
shows convincingly that Montesquieu has brought off a multifaceted characterization by
inserting subtle differences that are hard to notice but give a unique color and depth to the story,
just as he constructs the complex space of the harem by making it delicately flexible. Apart from
the discontent every one of them shows in their own way, there seems to be an organized effort
by the women to lead Usbek astray. Perhaps the strongest proof for this is their organization of
the picnic after Usbek’s departure. As Schaub argues, according to the order of letters it seems
that Usbek has authorized the picnic. But if we pay attention to dates, it is clear that the women
organized their first collective act of disobedience within a few hours of Usbek’s departure,
without asking for his permission (Schaub 44).

Eunuchs make up the third category of people in the harem. They function as intermediary
forces, bridging the gap between the master and his wives. They are thus involved in a great deal
of juggling and negotiation. They are primarily faithful to Usbek, and are expected to maintain
order in the harem while he is away. At the same time, however, they are not allowed to be harsh
on the women. Usbek’s instruction is paradoxical: ‘you are in charge of my wives, and you obey
them. Blindly, you carry out their desire, and, in the same way, make them carry out the laws of
the harem’ (42). In the course of the book, as the women mount their rebellion, the eunuchs
clamp down on them at every turn, rather than fulfilling their desires, and the longer the absence
of the master continues, the crueler they become. On the other hand, however, they are struggling with their own miserable lives, which make them compromise their role and try to have forbidden relationships with their master’s wives. Eunuchs, in a way, embody the tumultuous nature of the harem, in terms of both the characters and spatiality. Their ambivalent desire, their oscillation between fidelity to women and Usbek, their discontent with their occupation, all give rise to a sense of instability, the feeling that all the time something dramatic is about to happen.

The characterization of people related to the harem in Persian Letters is strikingly sophisticated. A serious battle over power goes on throughout the story. Women and Usbek try various tactics to defeat each other, and the eunuchs oscillate between them to shift the power spectrum to their benefit. The women are perhaps the most remarkable characters, if studied individually. They effect a huge change through a long struggle, and topple a brutal control system constructed around the fulfillment of one man’s desire. This supports Schaub’s argument that Montesquieu is ‘the first political philosopher to accord such a prominence to women’ (Schaub 42), although, again, it would be more accurate to replace ‘political philosopher’ with ‘novelist’, which is the only role Montesquieu held at the time of the publication of Persian Letters.

The Art of Comparison
Now that we have discussed the harem and its inhabitants in some detail, let us go to the second character of the book, whom we have ignored thus far. A considerable number of letters in Persian Letters are written by Rica, Usbek’s young co-traveler, who abandons his ties with Persia rather quickly and lets himself loose amid the wonders of Parisian life. I have postponed dealing with him to this point, since he has virtually no bearing on life in the harem. In this last section, however, his presence is important, since here I would like to take the book as a whole, and explore how the letters written about the Parisian lifestyle complete the Persian side of the story.

Rica arrives in Paris when his communicative abilities are still unrefined. He seems to hold no deep affinity with Persia, so he is ready to embrace the new experiences Paris brings into his life. Also, he is a natural storyteller, willing to turn everything he observes into an urban anecdote. He is often witty, and gifted in paying attention to the details of French society. In this sense also, he
is the opposite of Usbek: while Usbek delves into the world of ideas and hypotheses, Rica has his feet firmly on the ground and prefers empirical observation to every form of philosophical speculation. For him, nothing is too trivial to write home about. Usbek points out his extraordinary ability to absorb the new environment with admiration and envy: ‘his lively mind enables him to grasp things in a flash’ (74), ‘I am much indebted to Rica’s ready wit and natural good spirits, which mean that he seeks out every type of company and is in turn equally sought after himself’ (101). Essentially, what Usbek admires in Rica’s character is what Usbek himself is lacking, which is the ability to forgo Persia, the attachment that makes life in exile excruciating for him.

Rica never appears homesick. In fact, from his very first letter, he is already immersed in French society and describes the king, the pope and the constitution with precision. In his first year, he manages to observe vigilantly the life of ordinary people and to make interesting stories out of his observations. His sense of astonishment progressively diminishes, and he becomes increasingly keen on equivocal reporting, usually tinged with irony, even scoffing at the French lifestyle. His second letter about the pope, which is the twenty-seventh letter in the book, is an example: from a highly impressed young man of early letters, intimidated by the glories of French life, in this one he writes like a shrewd observer of a complex political system.

Perhaps the clearest account of Rica’s assimilation comes when he faces an identity challenge. Rica is annoyed by the fact that in France people ‘carry their curiosity almost to excess’, particularly when he walks around in his Persian costume. After being surrounded by curious people several times, he decides to do something about it: ‘I therefore resolved to set aside my Persian clothing and dress instead as a European’. This move causes a tremendous change in the attitude of the French people: ‘stripped of my exotic finery, I found myself appraised at my real value’ (83). In other words, the French transformation of Rica occurs fast and easily. The change of clothes makes him virtually indistinguishable from a French person, which indicates the adaptability of his character and his great difference from Usbek. He writes: ‘I go about in society, and attempt to understand it; my mind is gradually shedding what little it still retained of the Oriental, and adapting effortlessly to European ways’ (129). As a consequence, he becomes the voice of the West, as it were, the provider of the countervailing voice to Usbek’s obsession with Persia and his harem. Rica reports everything he sees, and since his judgment is not clouded by personal benefits, his conclusions are more reliable. For example, while Usbek fails to make
up his mind on the issue of the freedom of women, which goes to the core of his personal interest back home, Rica has no doubt that ‘our authority over women is absolutely tyrannical’ (93). In the second half of the book he mostly talks about France like a self-confident French person. After adopting the French norms of life, he even moves beyond them and starts criticizing the French for being talkative and selfish, even in highly respected academic environments, with a tone and language that could have come from a French intellectual: ‘The sole duty of those who belong to the Academy is to babble incessantly’ (149). His intellectual contemplations become deeper and vaster over time and he gathers a profound knowledge of Europe, which enables him to scrutinize the situation in other Western countries as well.

In short, Rica is the opposite of Usbek: he cuts his ties with his past, his Persian life, rather quickly and becomes a somewhat typical French intellectual concerned with all aspects of French life. Putting his letters together, one receives a detailed and relatively comprehensive picture of French life in the early 18th century. As a young man with a fresh perspective on life, he is ready to embrace new experiences, and then recounts them with wit and enthusiasm. Rica is everything Usbek is not or fails to be. This contrast takes us to the heart of Montesquieu’s narrative strategy in this book, but also his career as a political philosopher.

Comparativism lies at the heart of Persian Letters, and that is what the initial promise of this chapter implies: Persian Letters is as much about Persia as it is about France, because, more than any of these countries in isolation, Montesquieu is interested in the interactions between them, their fictional juxtaposition and what this comparative study culminates in. This concept takes on a more philosophical tone than a political one since, through comparison, Montesquieu delves into questions of identity and being in the world. One can hear the echo of his voice in the curious Parisian pedestrian who, having run into Rica in the street, wonders: ‘Is he Persian? What a most extraordinary thing! How can one be Persian?’ (83). Montesquieu’s answer comes in the same letter, when Rica becomes Persian simply by a change of clothes: being Persian has no essence in itself. Persian identity, like any other identity, is a construct to be understood in comparison with French or any other identity. This is the gist of Montesquieu’s epistemology: knowledge comes through comparison. Nothing is knowable in and of itself, and the meaning of things emerges through comparing them with other things. Hence his interest in travels and travelogues all through his life, and his exhaustive comparative studies of the nations of the world in Spirit of Laws, also his strong sense of cosmopolitanism: ‘If I knew something useful to
my nation but ruinous to another nation, I would not propose it to my ruler because I am a human being before I am a Frenchman’ (qtd. in Dallmayr 239). This is precisely the role Persia and France play for each other in *Persian Letters*: each functions as a mirror for the other, so that each can see and understand itself through the lens provided by the other. They might be the opposite of each other in many ways, just as Usbek and Rica are, but, like Montesquieu’s characters, they are also co-travellers.

In order to understand Montesquieu’s attitude to Persia, we should nuance the all too familiar notions such as enlightenment and Orientalism and take into account their internal evolution. In *Enlightenment Orientalism*, Srinivas Aravamudan takes on the explanation of those evolutions: neither Orientalism nor enlightenment were monolithic, homogenous systems, they were fraught with splits and challenges. He puts forth a seemingly counter-intuitive argument: the postcolonial enlightenment emerged in the early stages of the movement not in the late ones, and ‘the oriental tale should be understood as a bravura genre operating under Enlightenment mediation and postcolonial reconstruction’ (Aravamudan 4). In Aravamudan’s opinion, even though the enlightenment orientalism, mostly produced in the eighteenth century, was largely the product of imagination, it was not ideological as nineteenth century fiction was. The reason is that those works of fiction came along during the time Europe still lacked the self-confidence and the sense of superiority it later assumed as the locus of imperial powers. As a result, their relation to the Orient in the eighteenth century was driven more by curiosity and self-reflection than hegemony and dominance. The European required an ‘other’ to see themselves through their eyes and explore what they were or wanted to be, rather than someone who was to be subjugated. Oriental fiction came as a tremendously useful device for this:

> Oriental tales often featured attempts to criticize European cultural practices as irrational by reference to non-European observers; they projected Europe onto the Orient and vice versa in order to make larger inductions about sexuality, religion, and politics; and they expressed a strong desire to understand civilizational differences both relativistically and universally. (Aravamudan 5)

Predictably, *Persian Letters* is one of the main texts discussed in Aravamudan’s book. In keeping with the core idea of the book, Aravamudan argues in Montesquieu’s work, like many other writers of Oriental fiction at the time, ‘the investigation of alien culture often leads to the
discovery of singularities as expressive of difference’ (77), and the singularity that undergirds the narrative in *Persian Letters* (bearing in mind various significations of the French word *singulier* such as strange, odd, exceptional), is the harem.

What Aravamudan means by the harem as a singularity roughly equals what I have called a microcosm: a space that embodies and emblematizes Persia as a whole, and condenses the socio-political relations of the land into a circumscribed space. By elaborating on its events through an Oriental fiction, he tries to construct an ‘other’ for France, one *singulière* enough to allow the French to look into it as a mirror and reflect on itself. That is how Montesquieu’s comparativism comes through and yields fruit. Thus Persia, unlike what the literature about *Persian Letters* generally suggests, is not merely a place of origin for the novel’s naive observers. Bearing that in mind, one can understand better the connection between Montesquieu’s voice and that of the French pedestrian who marvelled at Rica’s exotic appearance: if Montesquieu were to pose the question raised by the French pedestrian, he would have asked: ‘how can one be oneself?’ His career as a political philosopher suggests that he has the answer too: by being open to the experience of the other, to comparing one’s culture and social habits and political system to those of others.

To reach his goal and make the comparison convincing, Montesquieu does his best to capture the harem in all its sophistication. By extension, since it was argued above that the harem functions as a microcosm in this book, it follows that a significant effort was put into capturing Persia’s complexities. He creates a variety of characters, diversifies the space of the harem, and imbues the novel with a sense of conflict that erupts in the end. Although having been accused of a simplification of the Middle East, and more rightly, of racism due to his justification of slavery, in this particular book the image of Persia he constructs stands against his political bigotry. Montesquieu detects the underlying, inevitable tension among all parts that mark out this particular region of the world, and dedicates a large part of his only novel to explore it. His conclusion is somewhat optimistic: under the yoke of a ruthless master, closely surveyed and controlled by eunuchs, the cloistered women stage a riot and cast off the shackles of patriarchy. Montesquieu saw a potential in eighteenth century Persia that many fail to see today.
Conclusion

‘Everything comes down,’ writes Montesquieu in *Spirit of Laws*, ‘to reconciling political and civil government with domestic government, the officers of the state with those of the seraglio.’ (60). The words could have been taken out of Usbek’s mouth, for this is precisely his primary concern, the pivot around which all his reflections turn. This is another aspect of the microcosm: Usbek’s failure to keep his harem in order speaks to a greater failure that Montesquieu saw as haunting despotic regimes. In that sense, also, the harem is not merely a place for satisfying erotic desires, but rather a metaphor, a microcosm for a system of governance Montesquieu was so eager to criticize.

In this chapter, I have studied the representation of a space and its residents. As a space, the harem has often been construed as depressingly confining and suffocating, a place of direct cruelty exerted by men on their women. As the recent scholarship around this subject shows, the real harem was far from this, and Montesquieu is among the few who captured that difference at the time. The harem in *Persian Letters* is a complex space. It has a politics of its own, and various struggles over the definition of space take place in it. The characters are also quite sophisticated, given they are all deployed against this background and have to engage in multiple power struggles at any given moment. Usbek, the main character bent on maintaining order in his harem from afar, diligently studies various forms of governance and tries them out in his private space, as if living up to Montesquieu’s idea of the inextricability of domestic and government politics. Usbek’s strategies, however, keep running against the wall, since a rather powerful campaign of resistance is held by his wives. The struggle between these ideas constitutes the main narrative line in *Persian Letters* and brings in a sort of consistency, the ‘secret chain’ that holds everything together, including the letters irrelevant to the harem.

That is how *Persian Letters* carries out a literary cartography of Persia: it chooses a limited space crammed with people determined to break out. The limited space of the harem, weaved out of various pieces occupied by eunuchs and wives, represents the suffocation Montesquieu saw in Eastern despotism, as well as the efforts by the oppressed to topple it. In doing so, given the metaphoric nature of the harem, Montesquieu provides his reader with a unique image of Persia: despite being depicted as a country strangled by despotism, he detects and demonstrates an irreducible complexity, one that manifests itself in the tension between all the inhabitants of this microcosm. The ending is even more fascinating: unlike the commonplace narrative of a
handicapped nation at the mercy of their despot, here the women succeed in overthrowing the ruler and in bringing his kingdom to an end.

In this, Montesquieu spots a liminality in Persia: this is a dynamic, complex, and somewhat unstable place that, despite being ruled by cruel despots, has the potential to turn upside-down at any moment. Two central arguments of this chapter, the rebellion of women against a patriarchal society and the spatial construction of Iran as a circumscribed space, will be taken up again in third and fourth chapters of this study. I will show how the idea of the power of the weak, in these cases Persian/Iranian ordinary women against a patriarchal master or system, reverberates through centuries and connects this text to ones published in our time. Moreover, Chapter Five will demonstrate an interesting similarity between Persian Letters and Reading Lolita in terms of the literary construction of two forms of harems within almost three centuries.
Chapter Four
Persia through the Eyes and Feet of Hajji Baba of Isfahan

Almost a century after the appearance of *Persian Letters*, another European author created a novel set in Persia revolving around the life of a Persian man, called *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan*. Unlike *Persian Letters*, James Morier focuses on one character throughout, and the nexus of relationships we saw in the previous chapter never takes form here. There are many other points of distinctions, as the books are written in rather different contexts by two different men: Montesquieu was a typical French intellectual with a great sense of curiosity about the Orient. He was somewhat enchanted by many aspects of the East, and looked at it as a point of comparison, a mirror to hold up before the West. Morier, by contrast, was a seasoned diplomat embedded in the British Empire machine for years, a pragmatic man with little penchant for enchantment. Apart from *Hajji Baba* and its second volume, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba in England*, he penned a number of other novels like *Zohrab, the Hostage* and *The Mirza*, which were far weaker than the Hajji Baba volumes. His non-fiction, however, stands shoulder to shoulder with *Hajji Baba* in terms of its depiction of the Islamic world. As the novel *Hajji Baba* proves, he was an acute observer of Persia, and his diary and travelogue are among the most discussed documents of the period. His account of accompanying Mirza Abolhassan Khan Ilchi, Persia’s first ambassador to Britain, stands out in his work as an especially important document about the dawn of diplomatic relations between Iran and Britain. In this chapter we focus on his best-known work, a novel that served as a turning point in the history of the literary representations of Persia in the West.

James Morier’s *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan* tells the story of Hajji Baba in the first person, a young Isfahani barber sold as a manservant to a merchant at an early age, and who thus embarks on a lifetime of travel and adventure. He happens on tremendous risks and great dangers all the time, and changes appearance to survive as he moves from one predicament to another. The novel lacks a consistent plot, and we follow Hajji Baba wherever his adventures take him. However, there is a pattern at work: every new situation poses a risk, and through cunning and chance, Hajji Baba escapes it or turns it to his own advantage. In the course of his life, Hajji Baba travels across Persia, traverses vast swathes of the land and meets people from all walks of life. Through him, we encounter a considerable number of spaces and human beings, and come
away with a large amount of information about the country. Finally, he comes to know the first ambassador of Persia to England, joins his entourage, and leaves behind his hazardous life in the hope of a more stable one in Europe.

Although a largely forgotten novel in our time, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba in Isfahan* became extremely well-known when it was published in 1824. It had multiple effects on English literature, particularly the tradition of Oriental stories, and fifty years later, when the Persian translation appeared, it was deemed a founding text of modern Persian literature. For the English reader, the impact of the book was mainly seen in terms of representation: many at the time believed that Morier had opened a new window to Persia, and by extension to the ‘Orient’. They praised the book as a turning point in the tradition of the literary rendition of the near East. In other words, *Hajji Baba* struck the British reader because its way of depicting the Orient, in their eyes, differed markedly from that of its predecessors. The list of its contemporary admirers is quite long, beginning with Morier’s renowned fellow novelist, Walter Scott, whose short quip at the outset of his review of *Hajji Baba* neatly captures what he thought the novel had to offer:

An old acquaintance of ours […] was asked by a friend, where he had been? He replied he had been seeing a lion, which was at that time an object of curiosity […] ‘and what’, rejoined the querist, ‘did the lion think of you?’ (Scott 253)

For Scott, Morier’s novel introduces the gaze of the lion (read Persia) to the British elite of the time which was, in Scott’s eyes, trapped in its narrow view of the world. He complains that even when a European writer creates an Oriental character, they behave like a European person, and if one strips away their clothes and appearance, they may well be indistinguishable from other European characters. Morier’s *Hajji Baba*, according to Scott, opens up a new landscape and creates an entirely new character, one that is peculiar and unknown to the British reader. Another contemporary reviewer believes: ‘there is no country about which so much has been written, and till publication of *Hajji Baba*, so little was really known, as Persia’. The reviewer points out that, before *Hajji Baba*, the British had an image of Persia dominated by *The Arabian Nights*: a colorful land of magic and beauty, enchanting palaces and harems, wanton women and philanderers. But Morier, the nameless reviewer contends, demolishes that fantasy: ‘we are unwilling to have our early illusions questioned or destroyed. It was for Mr. Morier to complete this invidious task’ (The Athenaeum 1488). The literary influence of the novel extended beyond
the borders of the British Empire before, in translation, revolutionizing Persian literature. For instance, it is an obscure but fascinating fact that Alexander Pushkin acknowledged the influence of *Hajji Baba* on his own work (Polonsky).

*Hajji Baba*’s influence transcended the confines of literary fiction as well. As implied by Walter Scott and others, the novel was treated as a source of information, a kind of nineteenth century model of *Lonely Planet* for Persia. It ‘greatly influenced the image of the Persians in London’, so much so that ‘it was recommended as a guidebook of the character of the Persians’ (Javadi 129). An example of this can be found in a book that was indeed written to be a guide to Persia in late nineteenth century: to explain his source of information for *In the land of lion and sun*, C.J. Wills recounts an encounter with a British colonel before his departure for Persia, and the colonel has a precious piece of advice for him:

Colonel G certainly took great trouble to explain to me all about the country, and, taking me out to lunch with him, bought me Morier's *Hadji Baba* [sic], saying, ‘When you read this you will know more of Persia and the Persians than you will if you had lived there with your eyes open for twenty years.’ (Wills 39)

Wills appreciated this advice and during his seventeen year stay in Persia, carried this book around, and allegedly never failed to learn something new about Persians from it.

*Hajji Baba* continued to frame Western knowledge of Persia in the next century. It seems to have been almost compulsory reading for American and British diplomats decades into the twentieth century. Mohammad Taqi Bahar recollects a night sometime in the 1910s, in which people from European and American embassies gathered to have a party. As was often the case, the backwardness of Iranians was a favorite subject. Someone recounted what he had heard about the superstitions around Saqa-khaneh. Others asked for more detail, to which he responded: ‘It is a long story. You don’t get such an anecdote even in *Hajji Baba!*’ (Bahar 117). The conversation implies that the cohort was reasonably familiar with the novel and diplomats frequently used it as a sort of touchstone. One of the most famous visitors to Persia in the 1920s was Vita Sackville-West who published a passionate travelogue afterwards. Preparing herself for heading to Isfahan, she writes:
But really it is quite safe to go to Isfahan; for it lies at the foot of its hills in the heart of Persia, as true to its name now as it was in the times of Hadji Baba [sic], whose adventures should be carried in the pocket. (Sackville-West 90)

As all these examples demonstrate, *Hajji Baba* became more than a literary phenomenon. It played a crucial role in the formation of a particular understanding of Iran for the British, and later on, Americans.

As one would expect, like other Western writings taking on Oriental subjects in the nineteenth century, *Hajji Baba* has often been discussed in the context of post-colonialism. In fact, it enjoyed a line in the founding text of the discourse, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*:

Thus whenever the oriental motif for the English writer was not principally a stylistic matter (as in Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat* or Morier’s *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isphahan*), it forced him to confront a set of imposing resistances to his individual fantasy. (Said 193)

Said alludes to the nuanced position of *Hajji Baba* as a text in which the unbridled fantasy of typical writers of the Orient merely served the stylistic aspects of the book, not its content. Such a quality is pointed out more clearly by Rastegar:

While the old oriental tale emphasized an exotic otherness about the orient, Morier was able to innovate the genre in such a way so as to reflect the change which occurred in colonial discourse from a discourse of *othering* to one of *knowing*. (Rastegar, *Modernity* 38)

The way in which *Hajji Baba* breaks from the established tradition of Oriental stories relates mostly to descriptions and details. The carefully explored setting and landscape is complemented with a vast number of characters from all walks of life in Persia. This material is put to use in a strikingly realistic way, and the result gives the impression of a text taking great pains to remain close to actual life in Persia. This can be drawn from various studies and conjectures about the real people who inspired Morier’s characters (Wright).

However, as Rastegar argues, such a shift is hardly more than a change of strategy within colonialism due to the advent of the industrial revolution. As the logic of profit prevailed and capitalism looked beyond national borders for new markets, the exoticization of the Orient was
rendered subordinate to calculation and profit. Consequently, a ‘knowable, quantifiable, and definable’ Persia (Rastegar 138), seen through the morally deficient character of Hajji Baba, was far more compelling at the time. He exuded a strong sense of realism for his contemporary readers, although he might sound quite exotic for our time: he was weak, sexually inactive, non-violent, even prudent, everything that an Oriental man was not supposed to be.

For the purposes of this study, the most salient aspect of Hajji Baba’s life is his constant movement across Persia, which makes him an unwitting cartographer. He is out in the open all the time, stumbling from one situation to another. This characteristic of the book makes it almost the opposite of Persian Letters: as much as Montesquieu insisted on keeping his characters inside, Morier never allows Hajji Baba to take root anywhere. What he gives us is a vast, variegated spatial construction that has innumerable parts and parcels. While Montesquieu puts forth a meticulously constructed small space in which all complexities of relationships in the land are compressed, Morier’s book never hesitates to venture into new spaces and take us to new territories.

Before analysing this chaotic and multifaceted vastness, let us look at the place of the book in the context of relationships between Iran and the West, and its longstanding yet unrecognized impact.

*Hajji Baba and Popular Culture: Unexpected links*

Hollywood could be considered, among other things, a barometer for estimating the level of sensitivity in US foreign policy, in that whenever a serious entanglement between the US and another country takes place, Hollywood intervenes in its own way. The host of films about the cold war, the Vietnam War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and other cases, which were released around the time those crises were coming to a head, speaks to this. Similarly, the appearance and success of Ben Afleck’s *Argo* is a compelling indicator of the importance of US-Iran relations for American society in 2012. Even though the film is about the hostage crisis in 1980, its appearance in one of the most fraught moments of these relations over the last decade (the coincidence of Bush and Ahmadinejad, the tense nuclear negotiations) makes the case for its relevance.
From the Iranian viewpoint, however, those developments pale in comparison with 1953. In that year, the CIA took action on the ground in Iran and, enjoying the wholehearted support of MI6, carried out a coup d’état against the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosadeq. Hollywood responded to Iranian affairs at the time in its own peculiar way, although the product is largely forgotten these days: in 1954, a film was produced that, in some ways, can be considered Argo’s predecessor. It was called The Adventures of Hajji Baba.

Despite being an adaptation of the novel, the film corresponds little to the book. For one thing, Hajji Baba in the film, played by John Derek, is almost the complete opposite of the novel: he is attractive and wise, extremely courageous and skillful in physical fights, and demonstrates impressive moral integrity. The story is also very different from the book: in the film, Hajji Baba meets a princess who has fled her father’s household to marry her beloved prince. Hajji Baba is offered a fortune to take her across the wild Persian desert to her beloved. They set off and pass through several battles and predicaments, and fall in love with each other. Hajji Baba hands over the princess, but when it dawns on him that the prince is a vicious man, he returns and takes the princess for himself. The core idea of the story in the film version of Hajji Baba is similar to that of Argo: a rescue mission takes the story forward. A brave and smart (Caucasian-looking) man takes on the hazardous job of leading a princess, or a group of people, through a wild, tumultuous situation.

In both films, rescue is made possible by brilliance and creativity, and the rescuer resorts more to his wisdom than to brute force. In the end, in both films, the rescuer carries out the job without having recourse to all-out physical action. In other words, both films indicate that in Persia/Iran the situation is unstable and indeterminate enough to be manipulated from within. That is the reason why, despite Hollywood’s proclivity for showcasing America’s military might, both Argo and Hajji Baba are based on the capacity of the protagonist to wield influence from within, performing covert operations and taking advantage of the fundamental instability of the land. Such a quality originates in the embedded perception of Iran as a flexible place, one that can be altered from inside. The power structures in Hajji Baba or Argo are far from rigid, and there is always room for maneuver without making a spectacle of force. Both films imply that in Persia/Iran, things are up in the air, and the overwhelming confusion makes everything possible.
Two years before the *Hajji Baba* film was released and one year before the 1953 Coup d’état, another incident took place that is worth noting: in 1952, the Lebanese government faced an unexpected situation. Due to the egregious mismanagement of the airline ticketing system, more than a thousand pilgrims, who were on their way to Jedda for their annual Haj (pilgrimage), were stranded in Beirut airport. Interestingly, the top Iranian cleric Ayatollah Kashani was among the passengers, the person who played a significant role in the nationalization of the oil industry, and one year after the Haj drama was instrumental in the overthrow of Mosadeq’s cabinet. Apparently the number of tickets sold did not match the airline’s capacity, and the Lebanese lacked sufficient resources to compensate for it. They went to the US embassy and asked for support. The Pentagon stepped in, and dispatched a number of airplanes to help the stranded pilgrims out of Lebanon, dubbing the mission ‘operation Hajji Baba.’ (Currie)

No one would have taken note of this name, although it sounds strange to take the name of a character from what seems a relatively obscure novel written by a British diplomat about Persia more than a century before the operation to label a rescue mission in Lebanon. However, with the wisdom of hindsight, such a title may tell us something about the image of *Hajji Baba* as a representation of a mission performed within the borders of a foreign country: the operation was carried out in the interim period between the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran and the coup d’état. The Americans were heavily involved in Iranian affairs at the time, doing their best to keep the Shah on his throne and manipulate the tumultuous situation to their advantage. Putting the name *Hajji Baba* on a ‘rescue operation’ in Lebanon implies how widely circulated the idea of this character was at the time. Such an assessment may be an exaggeration, but the fact that Morier’s forgotten novel turns up in Hollywood twice in two years with a Coup d’état in between corroborates this hunch.

Let us turn to the text. I will explore the novel on three grounds: first, I will focus on the spatial construction of Persia in *Hajji Baba*. It is pointed out that Hajji Baba maintains one characteristic throughout the novel: constant movement. He is a relentlessly roving character who settles nowhere, and traverses the land in search of a routine life, which he never finds. He travels throughout the course of the novel and visits diverse regions of Persia. Through his trips, considerable descriptions of landscapes and cities are communicated, as well as geopolitical information as to how Persia as a region is being run. Hajji Baba, unbeknownst to himself, becomes a cartographer whose diary makes for a significant literary mapping of Persia. The
second section will then discuss the character of Hajji Baba himself, as the main force that drives the narrative and is present in all the stories. I regard him as a picaro, who takes on all the familiar tactics of a picaro for survival, and in doing so accustoms himself to the chaotic space he has to live in. Third, I will look at the framing story, which will lead us to the often neglected role of the supposed translator of Hajji Baba’s diary, a fictional Englishman who claims to be Hajji Baba’s trustee and the owner of his diary, and who acquaints us with Hajji Baba through what he presents as his translation and revision. I will argue that his role in framing the narrative is more important than merely providing an opening in the style of picaresque novels. Although this section is about the first part of the book, it will come at the end of the chapter, since it leads the discussion to its conclusion.

*Interpreting the Space: Iran through Hajji Baba’s Feet*

Hajji Baba’s story begins by setting out on the road, and ends by embarking on another journey, so we both meet him and leave him when a journey begins in his life. In the meantime, he is often travelling, moving from one city to another, escaping from this gang or that master. He travels long distances and comes upon various cities and peoples, deals with a large variety of situations and tries to grow accustomed to numerous environments in the course of his life.

Following his trajectory on the map of Persia gives us a better idea of the vast region he traverses. He starts off from Isfahan, right at the center of the country, moves up towards Mashad, and arrives in the northernmost region of the country where Turcoman bandits have established their stronghold. He then moves back through Tehran and Qazvin all the way down to the Kurdish area, and also north-west to the border of Russia. Roughly speaking, in the course of the novel, Hajji Baba traverses the whole northern half of the territories held together under Qajar rule in the early nineteenth century. Given that a huge part of the remainder of the land is desert, and thus uninhabitable, Hajji Baba meets almost all the communities in the country as well. Overall, his traveling is a feat of mapping. The spatiality of Persia comes through his story in a comprehensive way, and unravelling this spatial construction helps us to figure out the spatial image of Persia that *Hajji Baba* constructs. Furthermore, understanding this spatiality leads us to understand Hajji Baba himself.

In the case of *Hajji Baba*, the question of literary cartography is perhaps more important than in the other texts of this corpus, since this is the novel that already, due to paratextual factors such as the nationality of the author and his career as a diplomat in Iran, as well as the unique position
of the book as a story narrated by a supposed insider, comes under the scrutiny of discourses related to colonialism. In this section, in order to show how the instability of the land is portrayed in the book, let me focus on the borders. Borders are a pivotal aspect of every nation-state, and border turmoil greatly informs the instability of a place as a whole.

In *Hajji Baba*, three border territories of Persia are selected as settings for episodes of Hajji Baba’s story. The first coincides with his first trip to Mashad: Turcoman bandits capture him and take him up to their stronghold. They move a great distance towards the north, ‘passing through wild and unfrequented tracts of mountainous country’, until they get to a sort of no man’s land that is not specified geographically: ‘we at length discovered a large plain, which was so extensive that it seemed the limits of the world’ (12). There the captives are struck by the vastness of the area the bandits have under control, and also by their considerable population and ‘teeming cattle’, as well as the ‘loud welcomes’ the head of bandits receives (22). They spend a while in the ravine, until the bandits decide to invade the caravanserais in Isfahan owned by Hajji Baba’s father. They head down one night, ride through jungles and mountains ‘with great unconcern, confident in the sure-footedness of their horses’ (23). The bunch of bandits quite easily reach the heart of the country and loot its most important city, and then rush back to their terrain.

The whole episode conveys an implicit but strong geopolitical message: the north-east border of Persia is totally out of the control of the central government. The bandits live there merrily; they have their own community built off the spoils of their frequent plunders. They can invade a central city and get away with no trouble, they cross the border with no problem and rule over a considerable part of the country.

Another border story is among the few in the book that does not include Hajji Baba’s presence. It comes through a story recounted by Zeinab, the lover with whom Hajji Baba experiences the sole emotional episode of his life in the novel, albeit one which ends tragically. She is from another border community of Persia at the time: one of the Kurd tribes in the west, on the border of the Ottoman Empire, who, unlike the bandits, live a decent life and harm no one. They are, however, trapped between two belligerent empires who frequently use them as a proxy to wage battles. Zeinab is the daughter of a tribal leader living under Ottoman rule, collaborating with the local pasha in sporadic battles. The Kurds appear also in another part of the story. Hajji Baba travels
through the border of Persia and the Ottoman Empire to reach Baghdad. The caravan has to pass the border dominated by Kurdish bandits armed-to-the-teeth. The caravan turns into a sort of military platoon, where passengers pull out their weapons and take defensive positions. The situation is quite similar to that of his first trip, as Hajji Baba himself is aware:

The whole scene put me in mind of a similar one which I have recorded in the first pages of my history; when, in company with Osman Aga, we encountered an attack from the Turcomans. The same symptoms of fear showed themselves on this occasion as on that. (377)

What Hajji Baba does not point out is the reason behind this similarity: both situations arise when he is close to the remarkably volatile borders of Persia. The Kurd bandits attack them and take them hostage, just as the Turcomans did, to prove the weakness of the central government, and the vulnerability of any Persian on the borders of his or her country.

In yet a further border story, another empire is involved, a stronger and more dangerous one, which is overtly at war with Persia. Hajji Baba’s wandering across the country coincides with the dispute between Persia and Russia over Georgia, which was a part of the Persian Empire at the time. The threat is serious, but the Persians are bound to lose the territory, not only due to the mightiness of the Russians, but because their leaders have ill-informed ideas about the conflict similar to those of a senior officer Hajji Baba meets: ‘the possession of Georgia by the Russians is to Persia what a flea which has got into my shirt is to me’ (164).

To account for the border conflict between Persia and Russia, Morier again uses his favorite method: he chooses a border community, Armenians in this case, and discloses the volatility of the border through the story of one of them. Persian soldiers arrest a young Armenian man, and we come to learn his story: like the Kurds, he was living a peaceful life until a battle between the empires broke out, and the Persians and Russians arrived ‘and molested the peaceable and inoffensive inhabitants of ours and the neighbouring villages’ (190). Meanwhile, he meets an Armenian woman, who is also a victim of the turmoil, falls in love with her, tries to marry her, but on the night he succeeds, another border turmoil ruins his life: the Persians and Russians start another battle, and the entrapped village sustains the most damage. A long description of the chaos ensues, which amply shows how unstable the whole situation is:
I saw Persians with uplifted swords, attacking defenceless Russians, rushing from their beds: by another, the poor villagers were discovered flying from their smoking cottages in utter dismay. Then an immense explosion took place, which shook everything around. The village cattle, loosened from their confinements, ran about in wild confusion, and mixed themselves with the horrors of the night. (207)

This description continues for a number of paragraphs, as if to remove any residue of hope of stability in the life of the Armenian community.

As the border episodes show clearly, Persia as a geopolitical entity, in the way depicted in Hajji Baba, lingers on the verge of collapse. Certain parts of the country are virtually out of control and extremely dangerous, neighbors lurk for any opportunity to destabilize the borders, lawlessness runs through the cities and no authority is able to maintain any sort of order. All the aforementioned sub-stories and descriptions create such an environment carefully: the spatial image of Persia emerges as a chaotic land with tenuous borders, and in a world of the dominance of nation-states nothing suggests more instability than the absence of well-established borders. Hajji Baba, like everyone else, moves easily: when he is on the road no government officer checks him, whether he is travelling as a bandit or a fake saint. Thugs and disloyal border communities rule over vast swathes of the land, and the boundaries necessary to maintain the geopolitical integrity of the country are strikingly blurred, sometimes non-existent. This is the outcome of the literary cartography of Persia in Hajji Baba: a fluid space, a region characterized by lack of boundaries, in which nothing lasts long and no one can be sure about their future place. Everything moves and changes rapidly. Within such a space, where survival requires somewhat unusual characteristics, Hajji Baba lives and works.

The Predicaments of a Picaro: Hajji Baba’s Fight for Survival
The supposed English translator begins the novel with an epistolary introduction, in which he recalls a conversation he had with another Englishman regarding the best way of writing about ‘Oriental manners’. In the course of the dialogue, he emerges with prescriptions. One of them is to glean the facts of actual life in the Orient and ‘work them into one connected narrative, upon the plan of that excellent picture of European life, Gil Blas of Le Sage’ (xli). Gil Blas is considered the acme of picaresque literature (Monteser 29), so he seems to be proposing the
picaresque as the best form for writing about oriental people. Later on he happens upon the diary of Hajji Baba, who is a picaro in flesh and blood, and his diary turns out to be a ready-made picaresque text fallen into the Englishman’s lap. Morier’s Englishman, however, does not elaborate on why he believes such a character matches his understanding of ‘Oriental manners’. To answer that question, let us first explore the notion of a picaro.

It is not easy to define neatly a character who evades definition by nature. It is, however, relatively easy to say who he is not. For one thing, a picaro is not a villain: ‘As the typical crime of the villain is murder, so the typical crime of the rogue is theft’ (Monteser 3). A picaro may engage in lying, forgery, cheating, even robbery, but never crimes of a grand scale. His main weapon is trickery. With respect to social status, he rarely succeeds in working his way up the social ladder. He often has a master, but he is far from faithful, and his ultimate purpose is milking the master for all he is worth, rather than serving him. Having extracted as much as he can, he hardly thinks twice about moving to work for another master (Monteser 8). All of this happens due to a simple motivation. The picaro is someone whose ultimate goal is survival, because he happens to live in a situation in which survival is not to be taken for granted. He tries all the tricks and rogueries he knows primarily for bread and butter. This motif stands out in the short novel unanimously considered the first picaresque: in Lazarillo De Tormes, the despondent parents of Lazarillo hand him over to a cruel blind man, and for the rest of his youth his life amounts to wangling food out of his parsimonious masters. In De Quevedo’s Swindler, Don Pablo’s prime lesson to his son is excelling in theft, which he calls the ‘liberal profession’, and the main means of survival: ‘if you don’t thieve you won’t eat’ (86). The rest of the book in essence recounts a chain of fights over food. Hajji Baba shares those idiosyncrasies with archetypal picaros. There is also a sense of humor and irony in the book that the early Spanish tradition is lacking. In that, probably the main inspiration of Hajji Baba comes from the English picaresque novels, such as Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders and Henry Fielding’s Joseph Andrews, works that Morier, being an Englishman of letters of the early nineteenth century, must have known intimately.

The picaro is strikingly lonely, and except for sporadic and superficial affairs, he barely builds relationships with others. However, his loneliness is not by choice, and that makes his life appear even more miserable. This is another necessary distinction one has to draw between picaro and villain: the picaro is not antisocial. He does his best to enter the collective, to be a part of society.
and live like others, but he is rejected at every effort. His world is a disintegrated chaotic one, which causes ‘the collapse of personality or its submission to an experience of nothingness’ (Blackburn 22). Most often, he has no option other than creating false identities and deceiving others in order to move on.

Hajji Baba’s character ticks all these boxes. In his life, all the meanderings and ups and downs notwithstanding, he holds to fairly simple principles: in such dire circumstances, the only way to survive is to be dishonest, to comply with the powerful and exploit them as much as he can. Like other typical picaros, his misery begins at an early age, and he plays no role in it: there is stiff competition over limited resources in nineteenth century Persia, and he must become a wolf himself to hold other wolves at bay.

Like other characters of this type, the event that turns him into a picaro is beyond his control. He starts off as an apprentice in his father’s barbershop, and quickly proves himself capable of doing everything the job demands. But an itinerant merchant comes along and buys him from his father. Like Lazarillo and Gil Blas, he leaves his hometown due to the financial pressure on his family. This is a key characteristic of picaros, presumably to generate empathy in the reader from the outset, but also to free them from family and social constraints. Then bandits attack the caravan of merchants and capture him, and this is the beginning of an ongoing metamorphosis as a character, his constant reinventing of himself for survival.

His first challenge arises when, having been arrested by bandits, Hajji Baba is forced to be their guide for their attack on his father’s caravanserai. They dress him up as a bandit and when they get to Isfahan, Hajji Baba acts even more ferociously than many of his companions: he almost beats up his own father and makes off with the most expensive bag (26). After escaping from the bandits’ camp, he moves to Mashad and sells water, a business based on a charade: he advertises his water as one blessed by Imams, and does it so effectively that after a short while he outdoes other water-sellers and unites them against himself (46). In an accident his back breaks, and the next job he takes on is that of smoke-vendor. This is indeed the most fitting job for his situation, because the business is nothing but taking advantage of people’s need for self-deception and distraction: he sets up hookah pipes for people who come to him to get high, and makes money out of their ecstatic distraction.
After a number of ups and downs, Hajji Baba ends up working for a crooked physician. His job, however, has little to do with medical issues: the physician has Hajji Baba pretend to be sick and go to the Western doctor in the town. The new doctor, equipped with the science of the day, has poached the patients from the local man, and Hajji Baba has to find out about his methods. Hajji Baba even cheats his boss and obtains a bottle of medicine by pretending to be the king’s advisor (96). Later on, due to a strange turn of events, he becomes an executioner and joins the royal guard. Having appeared as a somewhat squeamish man for the greater part of the story, he undergoes a radical transformation and demonstrates great cruelty (168). Escaping the shah’s service, he shelters in a mosque from the state police who are pursuing him. There he is told by a dervish that by playing at being a saintly man he can make a fortune. His false piety leads him to become the most respected man of religion among the pilgrims, but after he is robbed, he leaves the sanctuary, and his next job is the diametrical opposite of sanctity: he is hired by a man of religion as the pimp for his harem (324).

As disparate as these occupations are, Hajji Baba takes them on successfully, and often he has to move on to a new job due to unexpected incidents, rather than his shortcomings. That speaks to his striking flexibility: he adapts himself to every situation very quickly. The moments of transition from one job to another are very short, and often marked by a change of clothes. Changing appearance and putting on new clothes is the only ritual he passes through to begin a new job. He scarcely undertakes any other training or preparation. It is perhaps related to the job at which he excelled before going wandering around the country: he is a dexterous barber, one that knows well how to improve people’s appearance. For each switch of job, there are one or two lines about this swift change of appearance which leads to the change of social role: during his first trip, bandits capture him and keep him for a year. When they decide to pillage Isfahan, they need him as their guide, so they decide to turn him into a bandit: ‘I was equipped as a Turcoman, with a large sheep-skin cap on my head, a sheep-skin coat, a sword, a bow and arrows, and a heavy spear, the head of which was taken off or put on as the occasion might require’ (21). This change of clothes makes him a bandit; he receives no training of any sort, and is simply told that he will be killed on the spot if he fancies fleeing.

Later in Mashad, someone tells him that there is easy money in selling water, and he becomes a water-seller merely by purchasing the equipment: ‘I followed my friend's advice. I forthwith laid out my money in buying a leather sack, with a brass cock, which I slung round my body, and
also a bright drinking cup’ (43). Those jobs may not require particular training, but even the process of becoming a physician’s assistant is approached in the same way. As he is dispatched to talk the European physician into disclosing the magical medication, the only preparatory step he takes is to put on new clothes: ‘I accordingly stepped into one of the old clothes shops in the bazaar, and hired a cloak for myself, such as the scribes wear; and then substituting a roll of paper in my girdle instead of a dagger, I flattered myself that I might pass for something more than a common servant’ (94). Escaping prosecution, he decides to remain in a holy shrine until the dust settles. He has to be a pious man to swindle the pilgrims, so he becomes pious simply by changing his appearance: ‘No face wore a more mortified appearance than mine’, and he masters gestures and expressions that impress everyone: ‘downcast eye, the hypocritical ejaculation, the affected taciturnity of the sour, proud, and bigoted man of the law’ (256). He does the same when he lands the sharply contrasting job of pimp. This is how Hajji Baba readies himself:

I first went to the bazaar, and furnished myself with a priest's cloak, with a coat that buttons across the breast, and a long piece of white muslin, which I twisted round my head. Thus accoutred, in the full dress of my new character, I proceeded to the women's house. (324)

Of course, this is what picaros do. The change of character, often for the purpose of feigning compliance in order to gain ground, is the main characteristic of every picaro: Lazarillo plays at being dumb to steal wine from the blind man’s sack without arousing his suspicions. He serves well at the mass to gain the priest’s trust and access to loaves of bread. Gil Blas, the character upon which Hajji Baba seems to be predicated, follows a similar storyline.

Hajji Baba, however, demonstrates qualities that make him slightly different. Apart from the swiftness of shifting personalities, he usually goes too far in terms of taking on the new role. Picaros tend to respect certain limits. They never kill people or harm them irreparably, presumably to keep the reader on their side through the story. Hajji Baba, however, sometimes becomes so carried away by his own pretension that he transgresses the unwritten law of his ilk. When the Turcoman Bandits take him to Isfahan, he at first goes along for an opportunity to sneak out, but when they begin looting his father’s caravanserai, he participates eagerly and takes the biggest portion, not to mention assaulting his own father. As an executioner he must carry out violence to a certain extent, although his primary revenue is from taking bribes, rather than his

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executioner’s salary. Along the way, he becomes increasingly comfortable with the idea of violence:

I went about all day flourishing a stick over my head, practising upon any object that had the least resemblance to human feet, and to such perfection did I bring my hand, that I verily believe I could have hit each toe separately, had I been so ordered (172).

Hajji Baba himself is amazed by this development, because he has not been a particularly violent person up to this point, and he is aware of that: ‘the first impulse of my nature is not cruelty’. His analysis of himself at this stage encompasses his attitude to life, his method of survival: he places the blame on the environment, and given that in the new job violence runs amok, he cannot help but follow suit, because, as he puts it: ‘the fact is the example of others always had the strongest influence over my mind and actions’ (173).

In that sense, Hajji Baba is quite radical for a picaro. He lacks the kernel of morality that most of his literary predecessors have in common, and as he points out, his entire character is contingent upon the influence of the environment. In other words, Hajji Baba’s character is hardly more than a void. He comes across as a blank character whose qualities depend on the way he is clad at any given time. There are stories in the novel that highlight this idea. For instance, on one occasion Hajji Baba runs into a vendor in the Bazaar, and the cheap but elegant clothes he is selling catch his eye. He haggles over the price for a long time and purchases them about ten times cheaper, then goes to the hammam. This is the first reaction he receives upon entering: ‘No one took notice of me as I entered, for one of my mean appearance could create no sensation.’ But he takes it lightly, because he knows his people: ‘the case would be changed as soon as I should put on my new clothes’ (84). After taking his bath, he puts on his new clothes, meanwhile boasting about how each piece improves his character:

It appeared that I was renovated in proportion as I put on each article of dress. I had never yet been clothed in silk. I tied on my trousers with the air of a man of fashion, and when I heard the rustling of my vest, I turned about in exultation to see who might be looking at me. My shawl was wound about me in the newest style, rather falling in front, and spread out large behind, and when the dagger glittered in my girdle, I conceived that nothing could exceed the finish of my whole adjustment. (84)
Changing clothes brings considerable transformation to Hajji Baba: without doing anything else, he turns into a new man. In other words, even though his acts often amount to disguise, he employs disguise in a way that, more often than not, verge on transformation: disguise implies concealment, or a truth masked from the viewer in one way or another. In the case of Hajji Baba, however, the point is that he has no genuine ‘self’. He is essentially the character he puts on at every given moment, and in the course of the book we barely find out who he is. He moves from one guise to another without ever reverting to his supposed self, therefore every disguise is a transformation of sorts for him, the act that gives birth to a new identity.

Before the hammam he was poor and desperate, running around to save his life, but on changing appearance, he makes his exit ‘with the strut of a man of consequence’ (86). Yet more striking is the scene where he comes upon the corpse of Mollah Bashi in another hammam. Scared by the possibility of being arrested as the perpetrator, he cannot decide what to do. Meanwhile, Mollah Bashi’s servant brings his clothes and due to the darkness in the bath takes Hajji Baba for his master. Hajji accepts the role, wears the clothes, and follows the servant to Mollah’s house. Hajji Baba is the Mollah’s acquaintance, and on the way assumes Mollah’s character: Hajji Baba knows that Mollah ‘was a perfect tyrant over the fairer part of the creation’, and ‘he waged a continual war with his lawful wife, for certain causes of jealousy’, also that ‘He was a man of few words, and when he spoke generally expressed himself in short broken sentences’ (344). By adopting these attributes, as well as clothes, Hajji becomes Mollah Bashi: he enters Mollah’s house, he is led to Mollah’s chamber by the woman who works there, spends the night there and sneaks out in the morning. He lives Mollah’s life for a whole night, merely by wearing his clothes.

There are many similar stories in the book, giving various clues to his character. He begins by assuming other roles as a disguise or a trick, but due to his lack of integrity, he becomes indistinguishable from his mask, and recklessly carries out almost everything that his role demands.

Of course, Hajji Baba is not the only character in the book. Numerous figures appear and vanish in the course of his struggle to survive, people from all walks of life and every social status in Persia of early nineteenth century. This too is typical of a picaresque narrative: as a continuously moving character, Hajji Baba goes from one master to another, thus he is bound to meet many
people. The friction between the picaro and others, especially their conflict over food, drives the story forward. To set up this relation, picaresque writers often create characters remarkably different from picaros. In *Lazarillo* and *Swindler*, the masters are cruel and stingy, scared of the young man who struggles to fill his stomach. Their way of obstructing the picaro’s path is often by resorting to force, pressuring the picaro into coping with the amount of food they think he deserves. *Hajji Baba*, however, paints a quite different picture of other characters. A brief study of his masters, as well as people he spends time with, shows how these secondary characters function, so that we gain an idea of the Iranian people as portrayed in the story, and can understand the ways in which the population operates within the constructed space.

Hajji Baba’s first employer is his own father, a hypocrite who first married Hajji Baba’s mother by pretending to be pious, then managed to set up a successful business by keeping up the pretense and flattering the religious people. Then Hajji Baba falls at the mercy of Osman Agha, another fake pious man obsessed with money, keen on keeping up appearances while pursuing a hedonistic life: ‘He was, however, devoted to his own ease; smoked constantly, ate much, and secretly drank wine, although he denounced eternal perdition to those who openly indulged in it’ (5). As a hookah-seller, his main customers are dervishes, who are an extreme example of picaros. Their primary goal of these wanderers is laying their hands on as much food as possible, and since they have no particular skill, they get by on what people give them. So appearance is everything for a dervish. In *Hajji Baba*, dervishes are among the few who cheat and lie openly, and are happy to be sincere about their lifestyle. Dervish Sefer, Hajji Baba’s most prominent customer, invites him into his cohort by explaining the benefits of this lifestyle:

> We hold men's beards as cheap as dirt; and although our existence is precarious, yet it is one of great variety, as well as of great idleness. We look upon mankind as fair game—we live upon their weakness and credulity. (49)

One day, the three dervishes Hajji Baba serves recount their life stories. All their lives are quite similar to typical picaresque plots: being born into a torn and poor family with despondent or abusive parents, beset by hunger and insecurity, they begin a life of their own at an early age, living at the beck and call of this or that ruthless master, picking their way through a mass of difficulties and problems, extreme poverty in particular.
Later, Hajji Baba goes to work for Hakim Bashi, apparently the most reliable physician in town, who turns out to be a mere charlatan. With no knowledge of medicine whatsoever, Hakim Bashi has made his way up to the court by pretending to be adept, and now is terrified by the European doctor in the town, who knows one or two things about treating patients. Hypocrisy is widespread even at the highest levels of the system. As an executioner, Hajji Baba is taught from the beginning that he must live off bribery so as to survive. The salary ‘is a matter of much consideration’, so as an executioner, his life depends on ‘the range of extortion which circumstances may afford, and upon their ingenuity in taking advantage of it’ (170). As executioner Hajji Baba becomes substantially corrupt. All the executioners indulge in or connive at taking large amounts of bribes and ripping off the poor. But that is not the worst. The higher Hajji Baba ascends in the political hierarchy, the more tangible the hypocrisy becomes. At one of the most striking moments, when he is in the army and occasionally meets the grand vizier and even the shah himself, he is asked by the minister to forge the report of a battle between Persians and Russians: ‘Write ten to fifteen thousand killed,’ answered the minister: ‘remember these letters have to travel a great distance. It is beneath the dignity of the Shah to kill less than his thousands and tens of thousands.’” (235)

This is another differentiating point about Hajji Baba: in this novel, the particular techniques of survival that the picaro deploys are not distinguishing idiosyncrasies. Others use them too. Indeed the novel is largely populated with picaro-like characters who know very well how to gain privilege by cunning and pretense. In typical picaresque novels, Spanish examples in particular, the picaro’s cunning pushes back the brutal force of the masters. The masters are often aggressive and cruel, and tend to exercise naked force. In Hajji Baba, however, a competition of sorts happens between Hajji Baba and his masters, be they Osman Agha or the grand vizier, and the most cunning one gains the upper hand. Almost all the characters, even those who hold no concern for their survival, turn out to be unreliable and hypocritical. Rather than a narrative strategy, the picaro’s traits in Hajji Baba are borrowed to describe a people, a society as a whole, in which everyone is busy breaking the law and gathering money in any way possible. This is why Walter Scott, who came to judge Persians according to this novel, viewed them as ‘mercurial’ people who ‘are powerfully affected by that which is presented before them at the moment – forgetful of the past, careless of the future’ (Scott 254). Scott notices this dramatic
change of behavior in Persians of the novel, and takes for granted that this is the collective attribute of a people who adapt themselves within the fluid space they inhabit.

It is not difficult to see how the spatial depiction of the region matches Hajji Baba’s behavior as a character. Perhaps this is the reason why, even though he acts ruthlessly and unacceptably so many times, he is able to generate sympathy all the way through: the environment in which he happens to live, where mere survival is a feat, makes dishonesty, even ruthlessness, inevitable at some points. By creating a narrative cartography of a region based on the sheer instability of its borders and cities, as well as insecure urban and rural environments that hold everyone at the mercy of unexpected tragedies, Persia is constructed as a borderless, uncontrollable space where chaos reigns supreme. Hajji Baba is of course a product of this space, thus he takes on those qualities to reconcile with it: he becomes a chameleonic character who sheds conventional social principles and undertakes dramatic shifts and changes. He is not the only one who takes that path: a society of picaros arises from a vast wild space, and in the widespread chaos everyone tries to survive by having no compunction about the ways in which they treat their country fellows.

The British Hand: from Diary to Book

In his aforementioned review of Hajji Baba, Walter Scott writes: ‘The author of Hajji Baba’s Travels [sic] writes, thinks, and speaks, much more like an oriental than an Englishman’ (Scott 256). How could he be so sure? Scott’s knowledge of ‘Oriental’ languages and cultures was far from sufficient, thus he was not qualified to gauge the authenticity of the voice in Morier’s novel. But he was not alone in this. As mentioned above, many of Morier’s contemporaries, whose knowledge of the Middle East was far from remarkable, praised the author of Hajji Baba for the creation of this evidently authentic voice. How did they come to this judgment? In other words, why did they feel they should trust this voice?

Hajji Baba is entirely narrated by supposedly Persian voices, be it Hajji Baba’s voice or the voice of others who tell him their stories. It has a number of special qualities that make it stand out among its contemporaries, but arguably, it is this meticulous combination of voices that makes this text exceptional. This set of voices is precisely the reason the novel achieved the trust of Western readers, because Hajji Baba captures a rare supposed moment when a foreigner claims
to gain full access to an insider voice. But does it suffice to have a narrator who voices an insider’s perspective, however close to the native culture it is perceived to be, to make a novel read as “authentic”? How does the process of delivering this voice through a work of literature transform the nature of the voice? I believe that the answer to these questions should be sought in the often neglected epistle at the beginning of the novel, which functions as a frame story.

Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* is a great example of the use of the frame story in modernist literature. The story is centered around Kurtz but narrated by Marlowe, who goes on a journey into the heart of Africa to find Kurtz. Marlowe seems to be only a voice that tells the story of Kurtz, but in the course of the journey he undergoes a great transformation himself. Conrad entangles the frame story with the main one. In doing so, he allows the uncertainty of Kurtz’s situation to permeate the voice of the narrator, and undermines the conventional trust the reader tends habitually to put in that voice. So does, for example, Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*: by telling the story through the letters of Captain Walton, who hardly strikes the reader as a reliable source, the frame story imparts a significant uncertainty to the uncanny tale of Victor Frankenstein (Newman).

*Hajji Baba* is entirely narrated by supposedly Persian voices, whether Hajji Baba’s voice or the voice of others who tell him their stories. But our access to this voice is not direct. It is mediated by a fictional Englishman who provides English readers with the opportunity of reading Hajji Baba’s diary. In the introductory epistle of the book, the Englishman describes how he stumbles upon Hajji Baba’s diary. The introduction seems to be only a formality, but if one is to gain access to the ways in which the voice of Hajji Baba is set up to sound convincing, this letter is the best place to begin, since this relatively short epistle carefully defines the position of the narrative, and explains the process of delivering it.

In this letter, the Englishman reminds a friend of the discussion they had over the depiction of ‘Asiatic manners’. In that conversation, the friend argues that the previous treatments of the subject are unacceptable, because they involve ‘sweeping assertions’ or ‘disjointed and insulated facts’, mostly related to ‘the individual traveler himself’ (Morier xl). The writer of the letter emerges with a suggestion for anyone interested in breaking this reproduction of clichés:
Perhaps his best method would be to collect so many facts and anecdotes of actual life as would illustrate the different stations and ranks which compose a Mussulman community, and then work them into one connected narrative. (xli)

Inspired by the conversation, the English man decides to enact his proposition and begins taking notes and collecting material. The writer of the epistle then happens to end up in Persia, and he is immediately frustrated: ‘No country in the world less comes up to one’s expectation than Persia’ (xliii). He travels around the country, meets people and gathers data, and in his own opinion, he comes to know Persia fairly well. He leaves the country ‘with books filled with remarks, and portfolios abounding in original sketches’ (xliv).

Then he comes upon Hajji Baba, a sick Persian man, sojourning in Istanbul, in urgent need of treatment. The Englishman helps him out, and to show his deep appreciation, Hajji Baba gives him his diary, which contains the entire story of his life. The Englishman decides to take his chance and translate and publish it as the first-hand, real experience of a Persian man. It is worth bearing in mind that the Englishman has already made up his mind about Persia. He believes that ‘I had already seen and observed things which no one before me had ever done’, so Hajji Baba’s diary appeals to him insofar as it is not a great challenge to his discoveries. The Englishman embarks on the translation, but as a translator, he is not particularly faithful. The long passage in which he explains his method is worth quoting:

I have done my best endeavour to adapt it to the taste of European readers, divesting it of the numerous repetitions, and the tone of exaggeration and hyperbole which pervade the compositions of the Easterns; but still you will, no doubt, discover much of that deviation from truth, and perversion of chronology, which characterise them. However, of the matter contained in the book, this I must say, that having lived in the country myself during the time to which it refers, I find that most of the incidents are grounded upon fact, which, although not adhered to with that scrupulous regard to truth which we might expect from an European writer, yet are sufficient to give an insight into manners. (li)

The English text provided in this fashion differs considerably from what Hajji Baba ostensibly wrote. The Englishman cuts out what he considers ‘exaggeration and hyperbole’, corrects the chronological mistakes, and keeps everything he takes to be ‘grounded upon fact’, to bring it as
close as possible to European scrupulousness. He gives up his notes, and instead, works the diary of a Persian man into a book he meant to draw out of his portfolios.

This process begs a question: which fictional character is more eligible to claim authorship of *Hajji Baba*: the Englishman or Hajji Baba himself? We cannot answer that question because we have no access to the supposedly deleted material. But there is no doubt that none of them can claim the right to the text exclusively. So how can we understand their respective shares?

The Englishman lays his hands on Hajji Baba’s diary after a fascinating exchange. When the Englishman meets Hajji Baba he is rather ill. The Englishman takes it upon himself to save his life, and when Hajji Baba is up and well, he wonders how he can show his gratitude. He has no money, and if he had any he would not have offered it, because, as he puts it: ‘I know the English- they are above such considerations’. So what are the English interested in? Hajji Baba has an idea: ‘Ever since I have known your nation, I have remarked their inquisitiveness, and eagerness after knowledge’. He also notices that ‘they record their observations in books; and when they return home, thus make their fellow-countrymen acquainted with the most distant regions of the globe’ (xlix). Hajji Baba has filled a diary while traveling around, and now that he feels obliged to respond to the help he has received, he is willing to hand it to the man so as to show him ‘the confidence I place in your generosity, for I never would have offered it to anyone else’ (l). During this process, the diary also undergoes a considerable change of nature.

What distinguishes the diary from other forms of writing is its lack of intended audience, or rather, the coincidence of the writer and the intended reader. It is more about the articulation of one’s thoughts than communicating them with others. Therefore, until the day he meets the Englishman, the narrator and the narratee of the diary are the same. As soon as Hajji Baba leaves it in the hands of the Englishman, the diary finds a new narratee, and its nature is no longer only to contain Hajji Baba’s memories and thoughts, but also, to communicate them to others. The moment at which the new narratee enters the equation, the question of the authority over the text arises.

Ross Chambers has explored this through his theory of narrative seduction. For Chambers, the narrator is not necessarily the ultimate authority over the text. That is to say, if narration, as etymology implies, relates to owning information, then the act that makes someone a narrator is
the divulgence of the information he or she possesses. Such divulgence, however, poses a question of authority:

For to the extent that the act of narration is a process of disclosure, in which the information that forms the source of narrative authority is transmitted to the narratee, the narrator gives up the basis of his or her authority in the very act of exercising it.

(Chambers, *Story* 51)

This give and take, which essentially takes place at the core of every narrative, apparently has a weakening effect on the owner of the information, to the advantage of the narratee. Chambers, however, believes that the equation has another variable: the narratee offers attention in exchange for information, particularly when we talk about the fictional narrative, because ‘the ‘point’ of the narrative can only lie then in its obtaining from the narratee a specific type of attention’ (51). This also constructs power relations, which Chambers captures in the notions of narrative authority (the claim to be the person that knows), and narratorial authority (the art of storytelling). So the British narrator implements the diary ploy to gain narrative authority, to make the story seem convincing by claiming to have the authority that comes from the insider’s perspective.

To reframe the introduction to *Hajji Baba*, one should keep in mind this narratorial structure: the Englishman comes in as a benevolent person and saves Hajji Baba. As a reward, he receives a document he so badly wanted, he revises and manipulates it into something favorable to his people.

This is not the only time Hajji Baba delivers information to the British. He comes upon them also at the end of the book, this time through the Iranian administration, but in a strikingly similar way.

In Istanbul, Hajji Baba meets the Persian ambassador, and as he appears a knowledgeable person, the ambassador gives him a mission: the Shah of Iran has asked for a sort of report about Europe, for now that the Europeans have established their foothold, he needs to know them better. The ambassador hands the task over to Hajji Baba. He goes to an old friend who, in Hajji Baba’s eyes, knows a great deal about Europe, and comes away with preposterously false information. He puts the report together according to the information he receives and submits it
to the ambassador. Hajji Baba claims that ‘most assiduously did I apply myself in composing this precious morsel of history’ (434), but for the ambassador the report was not finished yet:

> When he had seasoned its contents to the palate of the King of Kings, softening down those parts which might appear improbable, and adding to those not sufficiently strong, he delivered it over to a clerk. (434)

This is the very manuscript that clears Hajji Baba’s way to becoming the advisor of the ambassador on his mission in England, which is the first guaranteed success of his life so far. He has stumbled from disaster to disaster, escaped many death threats by the skin of his teeth, and now he can eventually make sure that insofar as he is in this position he is safe.

In other words, Hajji Baba experiences two moments of salvation, both related to the English and tied to the submission of the information he holds.

These moments happen at the very beginning and the very end of the book, and in between everything in his life is falling apart: he is trapped among the picaresque-like characters in an extremely unstable land, and his safety is ensured only when a connection of sorts with the English is made. The locations of those connections are also meaningful: they happen at both ends of the book, promising to periods of stability and welfare, while in between, where the English are absent, nothing but chaos and misery occurs. Hajji Baba gains the stability he is seeking every time through a bargain over his life: he provides information, they provide safety. His information, however, is not to be put to use loyally. In both cases, Hajji Baba’s output is there to be manipulated and distorted, so that the people superior to him, the Englishman of the beginning and the ambassador of the ending, can lay claim to being men of knowledge. In this respect, therefore, the book itself could be seen as adopting some of the duplicitousness of its main character. In the course of the story *Hajji Baba* dupes many people to achieve what he pursues, but ultimately he falls into the trap of a book that not only tells the story of his life, but takes on the main quality of his character in order to deceive the reader into believing that it is narrated by an authentic voice. *Hajji Baba* the book effectively uses Hajji Baba the narrator for its own purposes, as a way of shoring up British superiority.
Conclusion

Mojtaba Minavi, the renowned Iranian scholar who was among the first to appreciate the importance of *Hajji Baba*, writes in the first paragraph of his well-known essay:

[Morer] has showered the Iranians under the Qajar rule with so much of ridicule and sarcasm and scorn that even our offspring for several generations will not be able to do away with the absurdities committed by their ancestors. (Minavi, *my translation* 283)

His tone is somewhat whimsical, but he is pointing out something crucial about this book: it reverberates through centuries, at least for Iranians. The Persian translation of *Hajji Baba* is still in print and every generation of readers in Iran is familiar with it. The translation has been considered a canonical text of modern Persian literature, and its meticulously idiomatic prose is oft-mentioned as a successful example of bridging the language of the people and the language of the elite in nineteenth century Iran.

In this chapter, I have shown that the reverberation is not limited to the Persian language. Nor is it to Iran. It constructs a powerful perception of Persia, which, as discussed in the introduction, transformed itself into various forms through nineteenth and twentieth century, while maintaining its fundamental qualities: Persians as unstable people and Persia as an unstable space. Morier’s brilliance lies in his ability to evoke numerous spaces and people that we visit through Hajji Baba, and thereby he creates a strong sense of accuracy. However, despite the number of spaces we visit, Persian society seems to function in the same way in all of them. Morier, in a way, levels out the various spaces of Persia and puts the whole society on a flat surface with no deep and constructive mutual engagement, and we visit each space following Hajji Baba’s stumbles from one to another.

The movements of Hajji Baba throughout the novel creates more than encounters with Iranians. *Hajji Baba* could be read as a mapmaking process, which portrays both the space and the people living within this space. Persians appear in the novel as a nation of picaresque characters, quite happy to indulge in swindling and cheating and stealing. From the highest steps of the social hierarchy to its very bottom, almost everyone in the story is engaged in an illicit activity, and stiff competition over resources stifles any rule of order. This chaotic lifestyle is intensified by the instability of the land, noticeable on its borders. The Persia of the time was coterminous with two great empires, namely Russia and Turkey, and experienced a constant border dispute with
them, to the point that the security of the border itself and the communities living on it were always under threat. The last straw is the bandits on the north-east border, who have carved out their territory and loot the passing caravans with no fear of the central government. In a nutshell, what comes through the life of Hajji Baba is the absolute instability of a country struggling with numberless crises, always on the verge of collapse.

But Persia/Iran has never collapsed, nor has it succumbed its entirety to a colonizer. It is an exceptional case in the Middle East, one of the few nations that has never been directly governed by a Western power. Iranians have experienced any number of puppet regimes and titular monarchs, but never a Westerner as their leader. The Englishman in *Hajji Baba* comes to take this formula to heart: rather than using his notes and portfolios for writing a book on Persia, which would have been his direct intervention, he lays his hands on a manuscript written by a native man, which fulfills his demands. The key word, then, is manipulation: the manuscript is revised considerably to be adaptable to European taste.

A brief comparison with the project the British had in India is instructive here. The frequently quoted instruction of Lord Macaulay, who called on the British authorities to create a class of Indians who are ‘Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect’ (Young, *Macaulay* 729), is not followed by Hajji Baba’s savior: he, as is explained in his introduction to the book, is interested in someone completely Persian in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect, who happens to have written the story of his life. This is also in accord with British policy in Persia. When the British sent Gore Ousely to Persia around the same time as Morier, they instructed him:

> to obtain an accurate knowledge of the military and financial resources of the kingdom of Persia, [...] every attainable information respecting the manners, customs, revenues, commerce, history and antiquities of Persia, [...] any Persian or Arabic manuscript at moderate prices. (Wright 13)

While Lord Macaulay was interested in the creation of a new form of English person in India, the Englishman in *Hajji Baba*, following the lead of his contemporary compatriot politicians, is happy to give up his notes and be a translator-manipulator, rather than an author. He wants to achieve what they have and manipulate it for the benefit of his people, rather than constructing a new race of human beings out of them.
*The Adventures of Hajji Baba from Isfahan*, which comes into being at the dawn of Anglo-Iranian affairs, sets a template for the future of Iran-West relations: the manipulation of an unstable land that holds an unstable people under a tenuous national identity. It offers a sinister remedy by inserting redemptive encounters of Hajji Baba and the British in the book.

In terms of spatial construction of Iran, it bears interesting resemblances to *Persepolis*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, and goes to the other extreme compared to *Persian Letters*. These two first books, constituting the classical examples of literary representations of Persia in the West, create two spatial models from two very different perspectives. In the next two chapters we will see how those models will be picked up by two major texts published on the other side of the divide that separates Persia from Iran.
Chapter Five
Mapping a Graphic Territory: A Geophilosophical Reading of Persepolis

There is a large gap between the previous two books and the next two. About 180 years separate Hajji Baba from Persepolis and Reading Lolita; the authors come from completely different backgrounds and the country they talk about has changed such that it is not entirely accurate to call it the same place, not to mention that the actual name of the country has changed from Persia to Iran in the meantime. While it seems hard to find any similarity between these two texts, their analyses in Chapters Five and Six will lay the basis for the final comparison of texts, which will come as the concluding chapter of this thesis.

The graphic novel Persepolis was published over the two year period 1999-2000, and immediately established its place in the pantheon of French bandes dessinées and became extremely popular in the English speaking world. The book explores the childhood and adolescence of an Iranian girl, Marji, born into a well-off upper middle class Iranian family several years before the 1979 Iranian revolution, which abruptly reverses the course of her life. A defiant and outspoken girl, the new rules put her at risk, so her parents decide to send her off to Europe. She attends school there, but things do not turn out well, and after a rather perilous period of homelessness she returns to Iran. In this new stage of life, she struggles to cope with the ever-changing dynamics of a tumultuous war-ridden society. She manages to marry and establish a routine life, but eventually she feels let down by Iran and leaves for Europe, this time for good. Overall, this book is a story of the constant movement and unending uprootedness of a young woman thrown into a world that makes no home for her.

Since its first appearance in 1999, Persepolis has received overwhelmingly positive reviews. It has since appeared on most top-ten lists of graphic novels in a variety of magazines and websites (Amazon, Time, The Observer). Apart from its artistic qualities and compelling story, Persepolis has resonated with many readers due to what they regard as its humane and impartial depiction of Iran. One reviewer is impressed by its ‘unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life’, and likens it to ‘a note in a bottle written by a shipwrecked islander’ (Arnold). There are ample examples of such perceptions on the web, which imply that Persepolis has managed to gain the trust of readers in the midst of innumerable media stories about Iran. One wonders how this has happened: of all the potential candidates for gaining such attention, why should a graphic
novel about someone’s childhood, by an artist who writes in French and has not lived in Iran for decades, achieve such resounding success as the best representative of Iranian society for so many?

Persepolis focuses upon Marji’s story and keeps her at the very centre of the narrative to the end. Her image is present in virtually all the frames of the book. She undergoes a tremendous adolescent journey, which takes place in several countries and endures a war and a revolution. She survives all this, and the book primarily recounts the story of her survival. Understanding the journey she makes, or rather one that is foisted upon her, as well as her means and tactics of survival, is pivotal to our reading of the book. Also, perhaps more importantly, the book is interlinked with a nation. There is a particular bond that Marji makes with Iran, and because her presence is dominant throughout the book, we receive a special perception of Iran filtered through the lens of an adolescent girl rendered through a graphic novel. This all makes for a unique angle for looking at Iran. The timing is also crucial: the book was published around the same time that 9/11 marked a new period of relationships between the West and the Muslim world, in which nuance and patience on both sides were to become rare commodities. As readers of Persepolis, we adopt Marji’s point of view and construct our image of Iran through the story she recounts. The incredible popularity of the book is all the more reason to take this image seriously, since it speaks to the great role this book has played in the corpus of contemporary literary texts about an exceptionally controversial country.

In this chapter I will follow the same structure as previous chapters, even though, given the episodic nature of the story, as well as the visual component integral to graphic novels, a slightly different approach will be deployed. First, in an introductory section, I will show Marji’s situation within post-revolutionary Iran as a schoolgirl. Schools underwent a fundamental overhaul after the revolution. They saw the introduction of the compulsory wearing of the veil for schoolgirls and female university students alike, not to mention the radical transformation of the school curriculum and unprecedented regulations for any form of spontaneous activity. In the first section I will briefly study the character of Marji within this environment to give a sense of her way of dealing with restrictions imposed on her movement within the space of the school, so as to set the stage for the main analysis of the book as a whole. The following section will take into account the graphic novel as a whole and show how her movements within the particular context of this genre constructs the spatiality of Iran.
I will then look at the rather vast space mapped out by Marji’s movement. If there is one quality she preserves to the end, it is her will to keep moving, to leave familiar spaces and environments and venture into unknown zones. This makes *Persepolis* a dizzying read: the number of different environments where we are continuously pulled in and pushed out resembles Hajji Baba’s lifestyle two centuries earlier. Marji continually traverses markedly different territories and introduces us to quite different people and cultures. In order to address this aspect of the book, I will draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophical concepts. Another perception of Iran will arise out of this line of argument: an unfinished, supple patchwork of various territories that overlap and move away depending on the circumstances, and which keep morphing into different shapes due to the smoothing effect of Marji’s movement across the land. In the last part of the chapter, I will look at Marji’s movements within this fluid patchwork of territories, and study her ways of connecting the separated zones via her movements between the frames.

*Thriving in a Closed Space: Episodes in the School*

We are reading a story about adolescence, and like all stories of this kind, the school plays a definitive role in shaping the main character. In fact, most of the major turning points of Marji’s life are related to her education: after she speaks out in the classroom and contradicts the teacher who claims Iran has no political prisoners, her parents sense the danger and organize her departure from Iran. In Europe, another turning point happens when she returns the insult of a nun, and the authorities expel her. This is the beginning of her misery, which brings her back to Iran. Finally, the deep frustration at the post-revolutionary education system in universities makes her think twice, and she leaves the country for good. So all the main shifts in her life take place in tandem with an unwanted development in her educational life.

Her school life, in all stages, is tense. Marji is never on good terms with teachers or staff, and everywhere she quickly stands out as a trouble-maker. A crucial part of her character is built on this continuous tension which, depending on the situation, takes various forms of defiance and disobedience. Throughout her graphic memoir, Satrapi presents herself as a staunch anti-authoritarian who never capitulates to dominant structures, which begins with her school life, since this is the first systematically oppressive environment she experiences. It is in the school that the clearest conflict between Marji and the system as a whole is waged, and studying
different stages of this conflict help to understand her relationship with the social or political situation she lives in.

Along with her classmates, Marji devises tactics of resistance and survival. The word ‘tactic’ is used here as a term articulated by Michel de Certeau as the opposite of strategy: while strategies are the basis for dealing with exterior forces and taking on large-scale projects, tactics are plans that an individual designs for action. To put it in spatial terms, the tension is between strategists, who are the ones able to control the space, and tacticians, who have no tangible authority and only plan to manipulate the imposed strategies from within the space. Tactics serve as internal maneuvers, operations within the confines of the other: ‘a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance’ (Certeau xix). Tactics involve the art of seizing opportunities, taking advantage of rare occasions to manipulate the system in one’s own interest. Certeau considers Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* as the moment of the emergence of a new heroism: the most ordinary person who lives the most ordinary life suddenly takes the stage as a fascinating character, as an inventive, smart person who designs modest plans to get through the ravages of everyday life.

This seems to be what Marji, often in collaboration with her classmates, is doing: playing the game of the school authorities and appropriating it to her advantage. In order to understand the reason behind this attitude, one should consider the context in which she is operating: the sweep of the revolution, coupled with the devastation of war, has diminished the possibility of agency to near zero. She is not, and cannot be, a member of any organized group and, except for some childhood impulses that could not be taken seriously, she has no clear agenda in her defiance. Her opposition to the status quo is played out on an extremely narrow spectrum of opportunities, and her aim is mostly making life more bearable, making holes and cracks in the solid barriers erected on her way.

A comprehensive narratological study of what literary characters do under such pressure can be found in Ross Chambers’ *Room for Maneuver*. Chambers’ analysis pivots on the concept of oppositionality in the particular way he understands it: oppositionality is a name for a discontent that does not translate into a subversive or violent act, but rather seeks spaces and avenues within the system to gain a modest influence, in order to alter the system from within. Such a tactic, therefore, does not target the legitimacy of the system in its entirety, ‘but it does mean that where
power is (perceived as) illegitimate, and hence as violent, there are no options in response that are not tinged with the nature of that power’ (Chambers, Maneuver XV). The subject of opposition thus colludes with power so as to encroach on its domain, while softening the power and potentially coaxing it into change. Among the examples Chambers studies in his book, Persepolis bears the most resemblance to the Latin American dictatorship novels, precisely because in both cases an engagement with a restrictive system, embodied in one of its institutions, plays the main role.

The very first two frames of the book neatly capture the main thrust of the schoolgirls’ oppositionality: in the first frame Marji is at a desk, and seems to be a typical student in post-revolutionary Iran, a direct outcome of a homogenizing, codifying machine that manifested itself, in part, in school uniforms. Such a machine functioned to form a mass of identical students rather than a multitude of individuals, and thereby curb any potential innovative resistance. The first frame shows her in isolation. The immediate next frame, however, challenges the conventional image: as if acting according to ‘go forth and multiply’, the number of students increases from one to four, and more importantly, each student displays a different character (see figure 1).

Figure 1. The first image of Marji and her classmates. Page 1

By multiplication of a simple figure into a group of individuals who have distinct facial characters, a minor but important difference is inserted into the environment. The frame that comes at the end of this page takes the multiplication one step further, and shows how, by
insisting on it, the girls reappropriate the veil and use it as a plaything (see figure 2). As Gillian Whitlock points out, the childlike idiosyncrasy of comics is employed in *Persepolis* to undercut the supposed monstrosity of the veil and show the vitality of the veiled girls:

[...] satire prevails as we see the playground scene of schoolchildren using their newly acquired veils as toys: to skip and to play hide and seek. In this way, Satrapi uses the child’s view to cut things to size and to put the veil into a different frame: it is after all a piece of cloth, and its fetishization by adults can seem strange. (Whitlock 190)

![Figure 2. Schoolgirls in playground, using veil as their toys. Page 1.](image)

Another example of this attitude appears during the war. The school staff require the students to mourn for the martyrs of the war with Iraq. The mourning is a boring, extremely disciplined ritual of chest-beating. At this moment of compulsion the students act according to instruction, and they are portrayed as one single body, in just the way the rules of the institution want them to be: a group of repressed mourners unable to show any agency, unable to alter the ritual, and following orders. In the frame, the difference among them is reduced to a minimum. The facial expressions are the same, and all the students are doing exactly the same thing. They are playing the game of the other, but without accepting it. They comply and follow the ritual, waiting for an opportunity to alter the atmosphere from within (see figure 3).
Later on, when they gather beyond the eyes of the staff, the opportunity arises. They make a parody of the ideology imposed on them, and their weapon is laughter. They make jokes about the war and play at being martyrs. After that, as they are obliged to knit hoods for the soldiers at the front, they use them as veils and covers for playing silly games. When they are asked to decorate the classroom, they do it with toilet paper. They take everything imposed on them, manipulate it into something silly, and throw it back at the school authorities (see figure 4).
Embedded in all this is the element of laughter. They deploy laughter to walk a fine line between subversive behaviour and blind compliance, and in doing so change the mood within the school structure. Their resistance, therefore, takes on an apparently modest, harmless appearance. That is how they challenge the iron fist of the principal: they disobey without giving enough room for
her to crush their stand totally. The principal only manages to punish them mildly, presumably only to appease herself. They are neither defiant enough to be expelled, nor compliant enough to compromise with, and that is their way of surviving in such a restrictive environment.

The school could be taken as a metaphor for the entire country at the time, since over the first years after the revolution, as Satrapi’s childhood displays compellingly, the main tension in Iranian society was the pressure a governing oppressive system tried to impose on its people refusing to be subjugated. Government policy, manifested in the school system, was one of an implacable force used to mould people into shapes it had defined. Another force was at work on the ground, employed by a very different subject, but a force nevertheless. The everyday people, who found themselves in the grip of a system they never expected, began to devise new tactics and to maneuver their way out, an example of which can be found in the battle between students and the principals in the school scenes of Persepolis.

If we consider the confrontation of these two forces as the structural characteristic of Iran at the time, we will have a model of sorts to talk about the wave of memoirs by Iranian expats published after the 1979 revolution in the West about their time of hardship in Iran. However, as I shall demonstrate, Persepolis can be considered an antithesis to this trend.

In some of the most popular examples of the post-revolutionary surge of women memoirs about Iran, such as Reading Lolita in Tehran and Not Without my Daughter (Mahmoudi), the power system is depicted as a gridlock: a powerless, desperate people face up to an omnipotent oppressive regime. The battle is rendered as lost before beginning, because there is no chance for the force of the people to act, let alone succeed. Such narratives essentially reproduce the slave/master dichotomy, in which the power of the slave is nothing more than a numb reaction to the will of the master. A rigid hierarchy is maintained throughout, and we as readers are called on to take pity on the disempowered slave. As we will see in the next chapter, the only conceivable move for the slave is often one of resignation, staying aloof with a great deal of resentment against both the master and other supposed slaves, and taking shelter in a private sphere for survival.

In Persepolis, however, the conflict of wills is centred around the difference at the bottom, where people are shown as multisided and colorful, constantly dynamic and fluid. The will of the students runs actively and determinedly; it has its own plan for being effective. By extension, if
one takes the school system as a metaphor for the country, Iran in *Persepolis* comes through as a multiplicity of forces, and as Marji steps out of the school and moves around, a similarly dynamic environment is apparent throughout the book. Rather than a suppressed populace that retires into their chambers, the population here is mostly portrayed as involved in an ongoing challenge that constantly saps the commanding will of the regime. What *Persepolis* puts forth, hence, is a multiplicity of forces in which, despite the colossal disparities among them, the acts of disobedience and subtle undermining of the superior force never abate. *Persepolis* offers an alternative formulation in that sense: no longer a simplified, solid duality of a brutal fundamentalist regime in control of everything on one hand and a despondent, weak people on the other, but a multiplicity of forces in continuous engagement, in which, once in a while, the less powerful gain the upper hand.

*The Geographical Disposition: Persepolis as a Territorial Challenge*

We have already discussed in broad terms the spatiality of the book. The first part of this chapter dealt with a circumscribed space: the confines of the school, the daily relations and challenges schoolchildren pose to authorities, the changes that such a dynamics generates. Here, I will look at the question of spatiality from another, contrasting perspective. Despite its crucial role, her life in school is a small part of her upbringing, and most of the book takes place in other spaces, or rather, in her moves from one space to another, embodied in the frames of the comics. In the analysis to follow, a spatial study of comics in general and this book in particular promises to yield a double-result: first, I will lay out some suggestions as to the possibility of reading comics as a fragmented map based on their idiosyncratic combination of elements, and second, I will apply them to this book in order to explore the ways in which this potential is employed to construct a spatial image of Iran.

‘For reasons having much to do with usage and subject matter, Sequential Art has been generally ignored as a form worthy of scholarly discussion’ (Eisner 5). When Will Eisner wrote this in the preface to his groundbreaking work on comics, this genre was indeed off the radar of scholars. Eisner lays the blame for this neglect on the artists themselves, and warns: ‘unless comics address subjects of greater moment, how can they hope for serious intellectual review?’ (5). However, he needed to wait only one year to see a breakthrough: in 1986, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* appeared, two game-changers that together marked a
dramatic turning point in the history of the genre. In their own independent ways, each book opened up new avenues for other artists, and as a result, the intellectual attention to graphic novels increased remarkably. Over less than three decades since this breakthrough, one can easily see a huge transformation in the genre, and the myriad ways in which graphic novels have broadened their reach and depth. Eisner himself recognized this significant development seventeen years after the aforementioned book, and in an introduction to another crucial study of contemporary comics, he cheerfully talks about all the new things no one could imagine two decades earlier: the collaboration between professional writers and comic book artists, the rise of superheroes in the motion picture industry, and the unprecedented variety of subgenres ranging from Japanese manga to what he calls ‘weighty graphic novels’ (Weiner 1).

Comics began to take up issues that were previously considered out of their domain. Comic memoirs are striking examples of this development, which generated a great deal of attention. However, despite all the excitement around this dramatic shift in the industry, Eisner’s ultimate aspiration with respect to finding a place for the genre in the realm of high theory is yet to be fulfilled:

Questions of comics form have received relatively little attention in English-language scholarship, which has tended to view the medium through historical, sociological, aesthetic (literary), and thematic lenses. (Groensteen 7)

In other words, a more distanced, theoretical approach that would pursue a comprehensive and systematic line of inquiry has been largely absent from the literature. As a result, even after 1986, this new wave of comics has been the subject matter more for cultural studies than narratology or literary theory. The most famous books that analyze the form per se are Eisner’s *Comics & Sequential Arts* and Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*. Although highly praised and oft cited, neither of them displays the theoretical vigor of a detailed textual analysis, in part because they are written from the perspective of the artist not the theorist.

The book that addresses this gap is Thierry Groensteen’s *System of Comics*, which offers a comprehensive and theoretically rich study of comics as an independent narrative form. Taking a semiotic perspective, Groensteen proposes that there is a sign system specific to comics. This language functions as a ‘spatio-topical code which organizes the co-presence of panels within space’ (24). It implies that comics are primarily a visual form, constructed of pictorial
units organized in a specific way. As a result, Groensteen believes the most fruitful form of study would be a large scale one: ‘We need to approach them [comics] from on high, from the level of grand articulation’ (16). He believes that in comics what matters is not so much the dynamics within each frame as the way frames affect each other:

In short, the codes weave themselves inside a comics image in a specific fashion, which places the image in a narrative chain where the links are spread across space, in a situation of co-presence. (20)

In Groensteen’s analysis, space and surface are central. Every frame matters only in conjunction with other frames, and each page functions as a rectangular receptacle of connections in various directions. In other words, he treats comics like a map spread across tens or hundreds of pages, in which every spot makes sense only in its topological relation to others, and together they provide a spatial articulation of a narrative world.

In this section, I will take Groensteen’s theory as a foundation for dealing with graphic novels, and, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophical concepts explored in A Thousand Plateaus, I will take the graphic novel Persepolis as a mapping of mobile life in Iran and exile. That is to say, the chapter will show how, being a graphic novel, Persepolis succeeds in undoing the conventional map by breaching borders and confines through the constant movement of its protagonist, and thereby producing a narrative that works more like a two-dimensional map than a linear story. The entire book can be read as a particular mapping of Iran, in which clusters of frames are territories separated out by an external force, and the restless movement of a character bridges the gaps between them and ‘smooths’ the space in the Deleuzian sense of the word.

In 2006, six years after the publication of Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi wrote a short article called ‘How Can One Be Persian?’ as a contribution to a collection of essays aimed at portraying a supposedly nuanced picture of Iran. She takes a geographical point of view, exploring the connotations of the two names for the one geographical entity: Iran and Persia represent quite different sets of ideas and implications. Persians appear in the works of Montesquieu and Delacroix, and remind one of magic carpets and Shahrazad, whereas Iranians evoke the hostage crisis, mullahs and terrorism. The East, she argues, is a nebulous and geographically meaningless concept, because ‘if you’ll admit that the earth is round, then you are always east or west of someone else’ (Satrapi, Persian 22). Geographical uncertainty, or rather, skepticism about
borders and belonging to land, appears quite often in Satrapi’s interviews. She tends to introduce herself rather proudly as a foreigner everywhere: ‘it’s a good feeling not to belong to any place anymore, at the same time it’s a hard feeling’ (Tully). The Guardian interviewer notices this trait even in her personal manner: ‘There is still something rootless about Satrapi. Now that the French have banned smoking in public places, she is looking to move again - perhaps to Greece’ (Hattenstone).

Being skeptical about geographical borders is, of course, not a new idea. Nor is it confined to Satrapi. However, what makes her perspective on the issue fascinating is the way she translates it into an extremely popular story like Persepolis: the language of politics, or rather, the language of geopolitics, falls short of defining fair terms and borders for geographical entities, and therefore its maps are not useful. One needs another map, a flexible one freed from geographical constrictions that encourages fluidity and movement rather than stifling it.

In keeping with this observation, I read this book as a journey across a map, a journey whose destination is the very act of moving and linking separate territories. By making those conjunctions, I will show, this journey helps a new space to emerge, the smooth, embracing space that results from the merger of isolated territories. This new space manifests itself in the form of graphic novels, as well as in the story of its character. This connection leads us to Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy.

Deleuze and Guattari’s well-known constellation of geophilosophical concepts can be traced to ‘milieu’ as the constructive element of territory. Milieu is a material field that generates an assemblage, a sort of ‘rhythm’ that a living being, be it a person or an ecosystem, carves out of the chaos. It is, in other words, an environment taking form around a force. To take the human being as an example:

The human body’s exterior milieu is the total of all materials accessible to it; its interior milieu is its organ systems; its intermediary milieu is the shell that surrounds it: the physical skin but also the various semiotic barriers by which the individual conceives of its ‘I-ness’ or individual identity. Its annexed or associated milieu is the materials that are useful or in use (clothes, food, speech, and so on) as well as the sources and source regions of those materials: the English language, such and such religion, the town in which one lives, and so forth. (Bonta and Protevi 114)
A territory is above all a particular combination of milieux, or rather, parts of milieux that contribute to assembling territories. The need for domain, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the drive behind territory, the need for marking borders and communicating with others. Territories result from ‘necessities to establish the maximal distribution of individuals of the same kind within a milieu’ (158). Territories are unstable. Species move continuously and cross over borders, reshape territorial assemblages and deterritorialize the existing territories. To explain the crisscrossing and the fluid nature of inter-territorial oscillations, Deleuze and Guattari bring in the concept of the ‘line of flight’: ‘a threshold between assemblages, the path of deterritorialization’ (106). The line of flight is the line taken to escape, a vector that leads to a move between milieux, and thereby between territories. For example, as a vector of freedom,

The paths by which I convert myself from membership in one religion to membership in another, or one profession to another, or one culture to another, are my relative lines of flight: the vectors by which I map (not trace) myself into a new assemblage (106).

Lines of flight are not always active. The over-coding machine of the state apparatus never ceases to wage wars against them, to freeze and fix and cut them up into segments. Dismantling the line of flight leads to the blockage of ‘becoming’, the obstruction of the continuous (de/re)-territorialisation that would keep the flow alive, the flow being the deviation from the norm and crossing over boundaries.

Now, to translate this set of concepts into a tool for reading Persepolis, one could rewrite the story according to this spatio-geographical terminology: a girl is born into a particular territory, a relatively wealthy Iranian family with milieu aspects such as leftist inclinations, the ability to afford a French school, living in a particular part of Tehran and following a particular dress code related to one’s social status. Such a territory is, of course, surrounded by other territories: the territory of the poor, the territory of the religious, the territory of the literati, all co-existing on a plain that is Iranian society.

In other words, if one spread all the pages of this book on one surface and looked at them from above, one would appreciate this complex map of the territorial distribution of Iranian society: a variety of peoples live in their territories, almost unaware of others that live in adjacent ones, since they are separated with boundaries manifested by forces from above. There is a great deal of fear and paranoia in this story: the middle class is suspicious of the poor (Marji’s father
thwarts a love affair between Marji’s maid and the boy next door, only because he is scared of any connection between the poor and the rich); the secular are suspicious of the police (all the scenes where police are present bode ill, from political imprisonment to being lashed for alcohol consumption or detained for improper clothing); and the parents are scared of the school (Marji’s mother believes an outspoken schoolgirl might be taken to prison and raped). The entire cast, of course, gives the fright to the rest of the world, baffled by the unexpected, seemingly ominous revolution. Consequently, people of different beliefs and approaches to life barely talk to each other. They tend to cluster in the safety of their familiar spaces and protect themselves and their families against the ill-intended ones outside, and they are so determined in this that they prefer to send their children to the unknown territory of exile.

In Deleuzian terms, the Iran laid on this graphic map is a heavily ‘stratified’ space. Stratification is a process of ‘coding and territorialization upon the earth’ (Deleuze and Guattari 41), one that creates stable structures out of the fluidity of the earth. Due to this process, hardened crusts and strata emerge whose function is the regulation of the flow. Those regulating blocks resemble the space between two frames in comics: imagine that, on our hypothetical map comprised of all the pages of Persepolis, all the frames merged and all the boundaries were irrelevant. That would create room for huge fluidity, but it would not do justice to any comprehensible spatial construction of Iran or any other place. Those rigid boundaries that separate territories in the spatial context of Iran are imposed from above: ‘The strata are judgments of God’ (41) in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, therefore they are rendered sacred by the state or other ideological structures, and breaching them may well cause severe punishment, as the stories of Anoush, Siamak, Marji’s grandfather, her own time in the school and many other examples show.

Therefore, the spatiality of Iran as constructed in this book, is an example of ‘striated space’, a hierarchalized, centralized space in which the free movement of bodies and the blending of territories is stifled. It creates a fragmented space where pieces are remote from and suspicious of each other:

Thus striated space, because it is composed of centers, is productive of remoteness, of the entire idea that there are places of more and of less importance. Striation imparts the ‘truth’ that ‘place’ is an immobile point and that immobility (dwelling) is always better than ‘aimless’ voyaging, wandering, itinerancy. (Bonta and Protevi 154)
This is the Iran where Marji is born, a curious outspoken girl who moves restlessly and barely respects the striation imposed on the space she lives in. How could she survive here, and what are the implications of her movements for the space?

*Effects of Restless Movement*

We have thus far discussed how the book is shaped as a graphic novel, what Marji does in it, and her way of dealing with her situation. Here the effect of her maneuvers will be discussed, or the ways in which her constant shifts and jumps from one frame to another will result in a form of change.

From early in her life, Marji sets out on crossing-over: she converts herself from a primitive leftism to a sort of imaginary childish religion; she spends time with her maid and enters the territory of another social class by facilitating a love affair between the maid and the boy next door; she moves from the present to the past, and through the life story of her grandfather experiences the territory that is the sad recent history of Iran. In the first volume, *Persepolis I*, which is dedicated to her life before the revolution, the moments of moving between territories are tellingly highlighted. She is pictured at several thresholds, at moments of taking lines of flight and facing bifurcations, which convey both her anxiety of taking decisions and her elation of stepping across boundaries.

The book starts with the veil controversy in the early years of the revolution, one of the most vexing problems of post-revolutionary Iran. Marji finds herself in the middle of a struggle between the state propaganda that promotes the hijab, and the determined demonstrators who oppose the compulsory wearing of the hijab, including her mother. She does not settle on either of the territories. She oscillates between them, and portrays herself at a liminal moment, the point at which she moves between two seemingly hostile territories (see figure 5).
As a child, of all the options, she chooses prophecy as her future career: a mediator, someone between God and the people, the occupier of the space between the sublime and the mundane, a liminal figure who does not belong to established categories. As a prophet, she depicts herself as a sun which, besides being a Zarathustrian symbol, is a ‘celestial body’ that in usual childhood fantasies lingers between the earth and the god: a point of threshold that, incidentally, has its place in Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology. For them, the sun, despite being outside of the plane upon which territories are located, is common to them all, and thus acts as a facilitator of inter-territorial movements. The sun is a cosmic energy that deterritorializing subjects, embodied particularly in nomads at this point, rely on, in order to carry out the crossing. This is in keeping with what Marji intends to do in the course of the book: to take the role of a mediator, a figure that sneaks across boundaries and creates common ground (see figure 6).
She concocts a sort of spirituality that rests on a conjured-up image of its god as an old man with white hair and beard. She summons him occasionally and talks to him, even takes shelter in his embrace when she needs reassurance. At the same time, she is drawn into an entirely different territory thanks to her family background, and reads up on Latin American guerillas, Palestine, Iranian Marxist militants, and above all, Marx himself. This generates another bifurcation, and the liminal point that marks the border of two territories is captured in a frame: Marx is facing Marji’s imagined god, as if leftism and religiosity came face to face through her oscillation between them. Her own face is absent from this frame; she is reduced to a voice that satirically points out the similarities of these two territories, and how easy it is to bridge a seemingly yawning chasm. Her absence could be also read as her turning into a mediator at the moment of moving over to another territory, and bringing each side to see its other through the glass that she has become. Also, the image could be interpreted from Marji’s point of view as she is looking at both territories. Leftist politics and religion are being brought up to face each other, the encounter actualized by Marji’s taking a line of flight between them and blurring the distinction (see figure 7).
The liminal position that generates a reflection on both sides resonates with the idea of mirroring, a recurrent motif throughout *Persepolis* that also suggests the salience of thresholds and movements between territories. Mirrors mostly appear at turning points of her life. From early childhood to the end of the book, whenever she is to take a definitive decision, she looks into a mirror and examines herself, often to see whether she is prepared to move on, to enter a new territory, to pass a border:

[…] it becomes clear in looking at Satrapi’s uses of the mirror as a secondary frame within the comic panel that *Persepolis* narrates a problematic development of identity, one which is agonistic and remains largely unresolved for Marjane as autobiographical persona. (Elahi 320)

Elahi has persuasively explored the motif of the mirror in *Persepolis* by drawing upon the Lacanian idea of the mirror-stage and the Althusserian mirror-structure. I propose to supplement his analysis by borrowing ideas from the Eastern (particularly Persian) tradition of thought, in which the mirror has a strong presence, both as the embodiment of self-reflection, a crucial element of Persian mysticism, and as a threshold for transforming into a divine entity. That is, the mirror could be interpreted as a line of flight, a passage to take in order to enter into another territory.

Persia used to be replete with mirrors, which were an inextricable part of everyday life. All physicians had one, as it was the major proof of death: they would keep it before a dying person’s face, and if no breath had dimmed the surface, they would sign the death certificate. It was also used for the treatment of Parkinson’s disease: they believed that gazing into a copper...
mirror had a significant curative effect. In wartime, warriors would emboss their saddles with mirror beads and would put mirrors on their chest, back and both thighs as armor, given that mirrors were made from metals back then. Furthermore, mirrors had a major presence in Persian literature. The Persian word for mirror, *Ayeneh*, originates from an Avestan word that means observation and reflection (like its Latin equivalent *speculum*). Before Islam, in ancient Persian mythology, the mirror was one of the forces that participated in the creation of human beings, and acted as a surface upon which the cosmic human descended and became a human being. For that reason it can be found in almost all wedding dowries in Iran, as weddings denote the initiation of a new life. In the tradition of mystical poetry, notably in the works of Rumi and Attar, a platonic conception of the mirror prevails. The long and complex story of mirrors and poetry culminates in Bidel, the seventeenth century poet, who has actually been dubbed ‘the poet of mirrors’. In his massive collection of poetry, no image occurs more frequently than that of the mirror, and it often accompanies wonder and reflection. One of his recurrent metaphors is the mark of breath on the mirror, which he deploys to deride the garrulous, intimating that talking yields no result but tarnishes the clarity of the mirror, and one would do better to contemplate self-reflexively in silence, as though looking into a mirror all the time.

This Bidelian moment of self-reflection combined with the pre-Islamic moment of transformation through the mirror seem to be a model for Satrapi’s numerous mirrors in *Persepolis*. The mirror encapsulates a moment of hesitation at crucial points in life, as well as the points of venturing into a new stage, a new understanding of the world. For example, the young Marji, having disturbed the son of a former intelligence officer under the Shah, is reprimanded by her mother and told to be generous and forgiving. To take in the lesson, she stands in front of a mirror and repeats her grandmother’s remark while shaking her finger at her reflection, preparing to replace revenge with forgiveness. Later, on the last night of her stay in Iran, her grandmother comes over to bid her farewell, and late at night she gives Marji final advice that will weigh on her mind for the entire period of exile. She is determined to live up to it, so she stands in front of a mirror, taking the advice to heart. That image also marks the first massive move of her life from Iran to Europe. The mirror reappears at the end of the book: Marji gets a young man into trouble, and recounts the story for her grandmother as a funny incident. The grandmother flies off the handle and scolds her for losing ‘integrity’. Marji goes to the mirror again, promising herself to correct her behavior (see figure 8).
The mirror frames more or less follow the same pattern: a shift of great importance is going to come about, and the look into the mirror enables Marji to both reflect upon it and make the decision. Marji, in a gesture redolent of Alice in her wonderland, looks into the mirror with solemnity, as if about to pass through it into another world. The words in each frame reveal that a decisive moment is taking place, and she is to effect a change in her life. To translate this into Deleuzian language, each mirror could be considered a line of flight pictured as a surface, a moment of transformation. In each frame we see two representations of her: one in front of the mirror and one in the mirror. Each frame seems to capture the moment of departing from one territory and stepping into another one, taken together at one visual stroke. In other words, transition from one territory to another is the essence of her tactics, and by linking spaces to each other, she renders them heterogeneous and rich.

In his theory of geocriticism, Bertrand Westphal dedicates a whole chapter to transgression as a crucial means for literary narrative to face centralized power:

Transgression is part of the system. It is that which makes what had appeared to be a homogeneous system a heterogeneous polysystem [...]. In overcoming this bipolarity, the state of transgressivity is the name we give to the perpetual oscillation between center and periphery, to the reconciliations of peripheral forces operating with respect to the center. It corresponds to the principle of mobility and animates the examined life (Westphal 49).

The territorial movement, however, is not to be taken for granted. The challenge to make those transitions happen, in fact, is a major force that propels the narrative. One could argue that the story begins not when Marji decides to move around, but when the movement is rendered almost
impossible: a revolution occurs, and the new government, instead of broadening the range of movements and consolidating the lines of flight as the subjects of the revolution would have expected, cuts them off. The freezing, congealing, fixing, or whatever Deleuze and Guattari would have imagined in terms of dismantling the line of flight, all take place shortly after the revolution in Iran, and a sequence of losses ensue that eventually force her to leave the country.

*The European Episode: Spatial Transgression and Exile*

The move to Europe, however, is far from a salvation: the lines of flight in Europe are already blocked, and, at least for her, the feasibility of movement is not much better than in Iran. European life in many ways is nothing but a continuation of the whole predicament Marji encounters after the revolution. Her life in both continents could be summarized as a mixture of shattering losses at home and failed efforts to succeed abroad. Such a pattern seems to be the major narrative component that propels all four volumes of the book along: *Persepolis I* and *II* tell the story of a continual loss in Iran, and *Persepolis III* that of a constant failure in Austria, while *Persepolis IV* narrates the story of the ultimate defeat in regaining what she had left behind in Iran. The loss here does not translate necessarily into material or financial damage. She suffers equally, if not more, from symbolic losses, as she keeps losing the entire territories to which she had access as a child. Her move to Europe is essentially an attempt on the part of her parents to compensate for these losses, to have their child move into new territories, since they presume it would be easy to do so in Western Europe. It transpires that they were wrong.

The main shock, which also marks the greatest loss of the first volume, strikes through the sad story of her uncle Anoosh, a political prisoner jailed and tortured under the Shah and released from prison just before the revolution. He immediately becomes Marji’s hero, a symbol of the struggle against the hated regime, an icon that she had wanted badly to have in the family. They strike up a good relationship and he tells her the story of his life, while post-revolutionary oppression mounts. The authorities finally capture Anoosh and execute him as a ‘Russian spy’.

The blow to the young Marji is such that she expels her most powerful spiritual support, the imagined god himself, which is also a huge loss of territory: the creative oscillation between leftism and spiritualism, which nurtured her childhood, is thwarted as one of the territories is eliminated by this blow. This recalls the frame where she draws the god and Marx face to face, as if the loss of the Marxist Anoosh had to be balanced out by the expulsion of the imagined god.
To top it all, shortly after the revolution Iran is thrust into an unwanted war with Iraq. The death of Marji’s classmates’ parents and of distant relatives, as well as everyday news of casualties at the front, overwhelms her life and the dangers of daily bombardments reduce her range of movement to near zero. The wave of people fleeing Iran to survive takes away yet another group of her acquaintances and thereby ruins another set of available territories. Nevertheless, she manages to befriend a girl from a Jewish family, a significant crossing-over in a time of sheer isolation. That friendship brings some colour to her life, but is not sustained for long. Perhaps the most devastating blow of the war comes when her neighborhood is bombed, and as she stands by the debris, she finds out that her new friend has been killed. As the frequency of disasters goes beyond any imaginable proportion, her parents resolve to send her to Europe, so that she can make up for the lost years by being in an alternative, more ‘civilized’ environment. The decision marks the end of her losses, and here begins the chain of failures to gain: attention, status, love, and so forth.

However, even before her encounters with the new culture, the first failure happens in communicating with compatriots abroad. In Austria, the family that is meant to replace hers turns out to be far from receptive. The girls do not get along, and the family is hostile to the newcomer. So after ten days they put her in a boarding house run by nuns. She makes friends, but none of her friendships deepen. She also hangs out with other students to a certain extent, even joins a gang of adolescent anarchists. She goes to the mountains and spends time with her housemate’s family, she participates in study with her anarchist friends and reads books with them, and new spaces seem to be opening up to her. But as things begin to look up and possibilities of movement emerge, the insulting behavior of a nun comes as a blow that shuts her out of everything she had built little by little. She starts anew, moves to live with a friend of hers and becomes more involved in anarchistic ‘activities’, but no matter how hard she tries, loneliness takes over.

In a desperate and yet meaningful act, at one point she denies her national identity out of utter despair. This is perhaps her most dramatic attempt towards assimilation. At a party, she is asked about her country by a boy. Due to the circumstances and the exceedingly vilified depiction of Iran in the West after the hostage crisis and during the war, she tries to pass herself off as French. Such a lie is against everything she was supposed to hold dear as an Iranian, her grandmother’s final advice, everything she is proud of. To put it in territorial terms, as she finds all the lines of
flight to other territories disrupted, she hysterically denies herself a milieu, perhaps inadvertently thinking that such an act would enable her to build an entirely new one, which never happens. She does not succeed, of course, and the blows keep coming one after another: her first boyfriend turns out to be gay, exploiting her for help with his mathematics exams; and her second boyfriend, whom she genuinely loves, cheats on her. She fails to succeed in any relationship. On top of this, another major shock destroys everything she has tried to build: her landlord accuses her of theft and throws her out, and she lives in the streets of Vienna for two months like a vagabond.

In short, although she does her best to carry out her inter-territorial moves in Europe, she keeps failing to the end. The European territories, as it were, remain out of her reach, and due to the unchangeable qualities of her milieu, such as her complexion and accent, she is unable to move through the territories of the other as smoothly and naturally as she did as a child.

Eventually, she decides to go back to Iran. The war is now over and things are taking a positive turn. She returns home full of hope, but even this shift bears no fruit. Everything has changed significantly. War has taken its toll and Marji hardly recognizes her hometown. The trauma of her last months in Vienna still weighs her down. The crackdown on any sort of unapproved activity is severe, and there is no room for maneuver here. All the experiences of failure in Europe, coupled with the past that she has completely lost, bring her to the verge of a nervous breakdown. She takes pills, which have no effect, and finally, before attempting suicide, she sums up her life after undergoing an intense hallucination caused by drugs (see figure 9).
The frame is a moving expression of being hollowed out and locked into one’s own territorial confinement without the possibility of moving over to others. This is perhaps the most direct reflection of Marji on her life, and a quite accurate one: the dreadful experiences of war and exile have blocked all the possibilities of movement, and due to this entrapment she no longer feels at home in either place. This is a critical moment in Marji’s life: she hits rock bottom and becomes empty, with no possibility of movement, no line of flight, nothing that helps her out. She eventually leaves Iran, this time for good, while the rest of her efforts to establish a home yield no positive result either. At the end of the book, we part with her as she is to move to Europe permanently, having bitterly failed to achieve anything so far.

The feeling of being devoid of identity, being a foreigner both in one’s homeland and abroad, is not an unprecedented or exceptional one. And this is not confined to her either. Millions of people are currently experiencing radical uprootedness, and falling through the cracks of every society. Millions are being deprived of their natural movement through territories of wherever they belong throughout the world; and there is a massive body of literature on their situation, as well as an established term: ‘exile’. Exile is the name for the productive emptiness that results from dislocation and alienation. Therefore, in order to figure out where her life is heading, we need to pause to consider more deeply the notion of exile. When we define this position, we can see how productive it actually is, and in this case, how a book like Persepolis is in large part an acknowledgment of this productivity. Through this position the story of a struggle against state
stratification of space is told in *Persepolis*, and the two forces at play in this fight are captured in the frames of the graphic novel.

‘Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience’ (Said, *Exile* 137). The first sentence of Edward Said’s acclaimed essay, *Reflections on Exile*, sets the stage for a complex conceptualization: a strange situation in which grief and pain is beyond measure, and yet it has begotten some of the most impressive achievements of human history. For Said, the baffling question is: ‘if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture?’ (137). Borrowing from Georg Steiner, he uses a term that has a Deleuzian air: ‘extra-territorial’ (137) literature, which symbolizes the age of migration and refugees, is the most vivid and striking artistic creation of our time.

Said defines what he means by exile, and marks the distinction between exile and other similar sorts of banishment: refugees are the invention of the twentieth century. They often fall victim to political upheaval and move out *en masse*. Expatriates, in contrast, choose to live elsewhere, no one forces them to depart. Exile is a more complex notion, not lending itself to clear-cut categorization. The main quality of the exiled, perhaps, is irreconcilability, the insurmountable gap between them and every established territory. That gives them ‘a touch of solitude and spirituality’ (144). Such a touch, indeed, comes through the staunch implacability of the exiled subject, his or her insistence on resisting adjustment. That bestows upon them a distance, an opportunity to ponder over things rather than being engrossed in them, but also a sense of liberation and inclination towards free movement. They are, therefore, prepared to reside ‘between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages’ (Said, *Imperialism* 330) or, as is captured in a fine pun by William Spanos: ‘the exile, that is, is a part of the new homeland, but also and simultaneously apart from it insofar as he or she brings that other world with him or her to the new one’ (Spanos 53). To put it in familial terms, as words such as ‘motherland’ and ‘fatherland’ suggest, exile is what Said calls ‘orphanhood’, so the trauma it inflicts on the exiled is tantamount to that of losing family. All these features imply that exile has great potential for problematizing imposed fixed identities. Said’s interest in Deleuze and Guattari’s project, particularly the works pertaining to the war machine and the nomad, and the way they suggest ‘a metaphor about a disciplined kind of intellectual mobility in the age of
institutionalization, regimentation, co-operation’ (Said, *Culture* 331), originates in the same notion of exile.

Homi Bhabha takes the discussion one step further by theorizing the very oscillation that Said lived through. In *The Location of Culture*, he sets out by declaring that, having passed through ages of annihilation – the death of the author – and epiphany – the birth of the ‘subject’ – we now live on the edges, on borderlines, both of place and of time, and that situation necessitates an understanding of ‘the beyond’. The beyond is the space of transit, ‘an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà - here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back-and-forth’ (1) - a space resonant with what Deleuze and Guattari meant by the outcome of the ‘absolute deterritorialization’ which they call a ‘zone of indiscernibility’ (226). Such a space is the outgrowth of what he calls ‘new internationalism’, in its turn an ineluctable outcome of the global movement, of which *Persepolis* is an obvious example. As a liminal space, ‘the beyond’ is the in-between that joins identities, works as ‘the connective tissue that constructs the difference between the upper and lower, black and white’ (4).

In *Persepolis*, Marji seems to occupy such a space. We have already seen a frame in which she is turned into a void, the emptiness that a homeless person would experience. However, another way of looking at this space is to consider it an embodiment of Bhabha’s ‘the beyond’: turning oneself into a kind of void, shedding the burdens of national identities and other attachments, creates a potential for seeing and telling things obscure to others too grounded to see.

*A Journey to Smooth the Space of Iran*

The book *Persepolis* arises indeed out of this utter emptiness, this liminal position from which the author is able to process her past journey into an artistic form. It seems that after a painful struggle to move around unsuccessfully, so much so that she attempts suicide, all the hardship she has gone through culminates in this book, which not only recounts the story of her failures, but in itself is a testimony to the fruitfulness of her endeavor.

Another concept from Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophical constellation can be put to use here: the ‘smoothing’ of the space is a counter-process to the stratification of it. The plane of consistency, which becomes stratified and structured by top-down forces, could regain its fluidity
if a smoothing force becomes involved. Such a force overcomes hard crusts and creates a ‘zone of indiscernibility’ (226), which comes as a proper ground for ‘flows’ and ‘becomings’. The smoothing force creates possibilities of mutuality, links separated fragments of the space and sets the ground for new forms of symbiosis.

When the whole journey of her attempt to find a home ends up in a graphic novel, the series of failures take a dramatic turn: in this form, due to the ways in which the book constructs the spatiality of Iran and its stratification by the state, Marji’s adventures take on a different meaning: rather than a series of frustrations, her very acts of searching and crossing function as a smoothing space. Due to her movement, numerous links are created across classes and borders, and the reader captures an image of a symbiosis that barely comes through other literary narratives about Iran. In other words, the very act of narrating all those encounters and disappointments turns this graphic novel into a complex map.

The restless efforts of her character for smoothing the harshly stratified space, begins with the school episodes: ‘Childrens’ play, and their actions in general, for example, can smooth the most striated space’ (Bonta and Protevi 145). The journey from her childhood to her stay in Europe and then back to Iran, turns this book into a compelling spatial depiction whose complexity is almost unique among other literary works about Iranian characters produced in the West.

Now we are ready to address the last issue regarding this book: why a graphic novel? Why is the form of the comic used to convey this story, rather than the more conventional forms used in stories of exile, like books or documentary films, and how does it contribute to the spatial construction of Iran as studied so far? Let us examine this question now from a different point of view, which considers the very nature of the genre.

Every comic consists of tens, if not hundreds, of frames that act individually, as well as collectively. That is to say, while the chain of frames is meant to tell a particular story, due to the static nature of the genre, each frame must demonstrate a separate identity. In major established forms, namely novels and movies, the narrative can flow seamlessly, and the shift between moments of narrative could go unnoticed by the audience. In comics, on the other hand, the halts and interruptions are widespread; they are somehow the rule of reading. And yet, an evident consistency holds all the frames together, as they are all meant to tell one story. There is, therefore, an internal contradiction at work in comics as a form: the constant jump of the eyes
from frame to frame, even within each frame from words to image and vice versa, and the narratorial connections that place the frames in a specific order. Such an experience marks the generic difference of comics from other genres. In Eisner’s words:

In visual narration the task of the author/artist is to record a continued flow of experience and show it as it may be seen from reader’s eyes. This is done by arbitrarily breaking up the flow of uninterrupted experience into segments of ‘frozen’ scenes and enclosing them by a frame or panel (Eisner 39).

Such a quality seems uncomfortable with conventional notions: what kind of narrative would continuously break up its flow and cause halts and hesitations? This inclination to straddle both moments of congealment, at which the narrative comes to a halt, and the normal flow of movement, resonates with the particular kind of spatiality we have discussed so far: that of a rigidly stratified space, in which a powerful force has done its best to keep all the territories neatly separated, but which faces an unfailing will to move between territories. The gutters between frames symbolize this move even more decisively: there is no clear passage between frames. Movement occurs through jumps, through ‘flights’ from one frame to another. Considering all these qualities, comics have an exceptional capability to capture the situation Persepolis depicts, or the spatiality Persepolis means to construct, since an interrupted movement between territories could be grafted onto the movement between frames.

Let us summarize the story in these new terms, drawn out of the physicality of graphic novels: each frame, or each group of frames that have some parts of a milieu in common, construct a territory, and the gutters that separate frames are the borders between them. Marji appears in a succession of frames, as if she is taking lines of flights between them to move across, but often something troubles her movements and causes a pause. During this long and strenuous journey, a certain territorial hybridity is being born, a smooth space brought to being by constant movements of the character, what Homi Bhabha might call ‘the beyond’, or to recall his favorite French equivalent, au-delà: a here and there, a space that evades stratification and sits astride on territories. Comics, as a genre, could be considered an au-delà: a ‘here and there’ of halt and movement, of flow and interruption, of words and images.

Through these frames that contain the life of Marji emerges the spatial image of Iran. Her movement brings through an understanding of the space in which all these shifts and turns are
made. *Persepolis* works as a map that registers the trajectory of a traveler, with each frame a dot on this trajectory. Following the journey to the end results in a particular spatiality very much at odds with the commonplace understanding of Iran as a homogenous, simple duality of an oppressive government versus a submissive people. *Persepolis* provides the space for a host of microworlds and marginal life-styles to come to the fore: the space of the school, the space of the family, the space of the boarding school, these demonstrated their oppressed coexistence and interaction and through these new links new opportunities for change are provided, all operating within the smoothed space provided by Marji’s movement across territories.

**Conclusion**

If one is to choose to go beyond the existing territorial boundaries and limits, the first move one would make would be to demarcate one’s own terrain and mark its points of distinction, so as to show how this attitude differs from other attitudes in established territories. As a result, one has to draw at least two borders. The first is with the homeland, which seems to be easier to draw, given how often it is already drawn in the memoirs of immigrants. The recurrent pattern, particularly in recent years, is a narrator, often a woman, who has moved or escaped from a so-called ‘third world’ country and now, having established a relatively easy life in a Western society, looks back on the years past with the wisdom of hindsight, and recounts what has happened to her.

This commonplace formula, one that will be discussed at some length in the next chapter in the case of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, is often mixed with explicit or implicit appreciation of the host country and a rather dark, sometimes exaggerated, portrayal of the homeland. Examples have been studied extensively (Whitlock; Fernea). In such examples, the distance from the homeland is maintained and the border between the exiled narrator and the life in the homeland is drawn carefully. As for the line with the host country, however, the question of distancing appears, if at all, as a marginal issue. That is to say, the new terrain the author of the memoir intends to set up is carved within the territory of the host; hence it could not be new. One consequence of such an approach is stabilizing the position from which the act of recounting is rendered possible, the position the author occupies to look back on her past without engaging with the problems of the present: as the word ‘memoir’ may suggest, the author is to meet the challenge of the past, thus all her troubles seem to lie in the past, and despite its potential complications, the current
situation seems safe enough not to cause concern. The second border, therefore, the one between the exiled and the host country, hardly becomes a central issue in these memoirs.

This is why *Persepolis* stands out among such memoirs: in this book, the second border is considered as important as the one with the homeland, and is drawn with the same precision and thoughtfulness. Both distinctions are equally important here, and the narrator never identifies fully with any of her options, never becomes incorporated into any of the territories she is entitled to live in. As a result, her position remains elusive to the very end. In fact, rather than reaching a safe shore to start talking about the past, her failure in bringing her crossings to a close is itself her memoir, rather than material for a memoir. *Persepolis* takes a fluid form, one in accord with Marji’s adolescence, and spreads this fluidity into its construction of the spatiality of Iran. Precisely because the identification with any of the conventional territories never happens, a new space comes to the fore that is founded on movement, and becomes superimposed on the one that stratifying forces, whether domestic or foreign ones, often neglect, partially because it brings a complexity into the equation that forestalls knee-jerk reactions or analyses.

In that regard, *Persepolis* and *Hajji Baba* take a similar cartographic approach to Persia-Iran, which is almost the opposite of that of *Persian Letters* and *Reading Lolita*: they both set the character out on a hazardous journey through uncertain territories, and thereby construct a literary map of Persia-Iran as a vast patchwork that is always in flux and hard to translate into a unified notion. What differs these two books is the idea of resistance and change: for Morier, Hajji Baba’s movements are desperate efforts to escape the tumult and survive. Neither Hajji Baba nor any other character is strong enough to move towards bringing a change, they merely go along with the situation and try to get the best out of it for themselves. The only hope for real change comes from outside, and the presence of the British improves on the reality of Persia. In *Persepolis*, by contrast, the movements of a small girl who, out of curiosity and a built-in sense of defiance, moves into territories that are not designed for her, and thereby, through her movements, unwittingly engages in a cartography of Iran that constructs its map as a multi-faceted, colorful society. In *Persepolis* the belief in the change brought about by ordinary people through defying the boundaries and limits is key, but in *Hajji Baba* the only moment the chaos is contained occurs through the appearance of the British.
Chapter Six


Reading Lolita in Tehran resembles Persepolis in several ways: both are written by Iranian women in exile, and set in roughly the same historical period in Iran. There are, however, substantial differences and divergences. In fact, in terms of its spatial construction of Iran, this memoir resembles Persian Letters more than Persepolis, in that it revolves around a group of women in a circumscribed space seeking to confront patriarchy and despotism.

Reading Lolita was published in 2003, and quickly gained widespread critical and public attention. For a memoir of an English teacher in Tehran during the 1980s, such attention would have been unexpected. The story begins shortly before the 1979 revolution in Iran, while Nafisi is in the US, studying at university. She moves to Iran after the revolution to be a part of the enthusiastic movement to build a new Iran. She lands a job as a professor of English literature at the University of Tehran and starts teaching, but things begin to take a frightening turn as the revolution comes about. She soon after loses her job thanks to her refusal to wear the compulsory hijab, and then selects a handful of the students whom she liked the most during her teaching appointment, and forms a study group at her house to discuss her favorite novels with them.

The main body of the book essentially consists of the explorations of this study group into Western masterpieces, and the appreciation of the beauty and impeccability of those works, along with intermittent allusions to their own lives in Iran at the time with the aid of those novels. The book is divided into four parts, each part dedicated to study of a Western literary figure, beginning with Vladimir Nabokov, and from there to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austin, along with the stories of the people in the study group in the context of post-revolutionary Iran. The core idea of the book could be summarized as a tribute to the transformative power of literature. The book thereby proposes a method of reading literature according to which the readers absorb a novel best when they regard it as an imaginary world, in which one can be absolutely unshackled and removed from the ravages of everyday life.

In the previous chapters, I devoted little space to the immediate reactions of readers and reviewers. In this chapter, by contrast, I will do so in a relatively detailed way, because the storm which Reading Lolita raised among the readers, particularly in North America, is somewhat
unprecedented for a memoir. At the time of Morier and Montesquieu, the vast network of contemporary media did not exist, so such controversy could not have happened back then in the same way. In the case of *Persepolis*, on the other hand, the response was almost unanimously positive, as the examples in the chapter show, so there was no controversy to discuss. As for *Reading Lolita*, however, it is crucial to address the polarization that occurred, because it gives us a window into the ways in which the book is constructed and its facts are arranged, and goes to the heart of the literary construction of Iran for a Western readership, which is the focus of this project.

On the surface, the story has no conventional sign of an immediate bestseller. A great deal of fairly sophisticated literary analysis is introduced in the narrative, and it contains long passages in praise of high literature. To explain this unexpected popularity, many have underlined the timing of its publication: the book appeared in the politically heated period between the collapse of the twin towers in New York and the Iraq war, when Iran reappeared on the radar of Western media. The sensitivity over Iran rocketed when, in May 2002, it was labeled an ‘axis of evil’ along with North Korea and Iraq by President George W. Bush, which implied the possibility of military engagement.

However, the argument concerning the timing of its release seems still insufficient in explaining its spectacular success. *Reading Lolita* became the number one bestseller in the *New York Times* and remained on the list for eighteen months. Its achievements went further: ‘By April 2004 it ranked second on the list of most-read books on college campuses’ and it became ‘the fifth-most-borrowed nonfiction book in U.S. libraries’ (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 623). The reviews of the book, particularly within the first months of its publication, were overwhelmingly positive. Later editions are packed with blurbs by big names on the first page, praising the book for reasons such as its ‘celebration of the power of the novel’ according to Geraldine Brooks, its ‘properly complex reflections about the ravages of theocracy’ in Susan Sontag’s opinion, and being ‘a literary life raft on Iran's fundamentalist sea’ as Margaret Atwood suggested (Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*). The academic analyses of the book appeared later and gradually, and their opinions were often in sharp contrast with those of reviewers. The largely negative assessments considered *Reading Lolita* as ‘an excellent example of how neoliberal rhetoric is now being deployed by neoconservatives’ (Rowe 253), ‘one-sided and extreme, in fact as extreme as the
views of the revolutionaries it criticizes’ (Keshavarz 110), and ‘blatantly advancing the presumed cultural foregrounding of a predatory empire’ (Dabashi, Native).

As these examples show, the debate around Reading Lolita has been strikingly polarized. Amy DePaul argues convincingly that such a contrast relates to the dramatic political shift in American politics over a short period of time. Under Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, blunt expressions of anti-Americanism reduced dramatically, so much so that in the wake of 9/11 many Iranians came out to streets to pay respect to the victims, almost all the people in high positions of power condemned the attacks and even such a conservative cleric as Ayatollah Imami Kashani during Friday prayers called the terrorist attacks on the twin towers ‘catastrophic’, which is all the more reason why Bush’s axis of evil comment is baffling. Such an atmosphere continued until the end of Khatami’s presidency. Then the Iraq war took place in 2003, which increased the level of anti-Americanism dramatically across the Middle East, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power in 2004 in Iran. Iranian-American relations entered another precarious phase as the rhetoric of hardliners on both sides gained the upper hand.

This turning point, among other things, marks two different kinds of responses to Reading Lolita in the US. Before the Iraq war, the US was still considered a victim by many, even though the US army was already well into the Afghanistan war. The Iraq war, however, turned many scholars and intellectuals against what many regarded as a new stage of American imperialism. Therefore, given that Reading Lolita is highly complimentary towards American culture, it is not surprising that it received such contrary receptions from American scholars during this transition. DePaul argues that ‘Nafisi’s book [was] operating in a different America than the one in which it first appeared’ (DePaul 77). One might add to this a different Iran as well.

This is part of the story of course, but by no means the whole story. Reading Lolita itself has the potential to polarize its readers, largely for the ways in which it presents memories and facts. It would not be an exaggeration to say it might well have created this polarization had not that political fluctuation happened. Now that the book has moved into the second decade of its life and the tension between the US and Iran has slightly abated, particularly after the developments regarding the nuclear deal in 2015, one can read Reading Lolita in a less charged atmosphere, and thus with a certain critical distance. This privilege of hindsight allows me to take on a perspective quite different from many of the scholars who analyzed the book within a short time
of its publication. Most of this chapter will be devoted to a close reading of the book so as to show how the story of Nafisi’s life in Iran evolves through a study of the Western canonical texts which the author discusses in her memoir.

In what follows, first I will attempt to find the more textual and less political reasons for the rather emotional reactions which this text has provoked. I will show how the operation of a selective memory - without any apparent awareness of its selectiveness - forms an apparently consistent whole that is not necessarily accurate, and yet, hard to debunk. Given the persuasiveness of the selective memory, I will argue that a critical reading of the book must set out from within this selection and look at the arrangement and presentation of the provided facts, rather than the left-out pieces. I explore the ways in which such an arrangement leads to a particular construction of Iran.

This chapter begins by an overview of responses to Reading Lolita, in order to place this study within the somewhat confusing literature around this book. The rest of this chapter, as in previous ones, is devoted to two topics: first, an analysis of the spatiality of Iran as constructed in Reading Lolita, followed by a discussion around characterization, focusing on the ways in which the characters operate within the space constructed for them. Furthermore, in the last section I will study what one is likely to understand about Iran by reading the book, reflecting upon the overall image of contemporary Iran that Reading Lolita constructs.

The Truth and the Whole Truth
The Western legal system demands that witnesses in court give the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This trinity of conditions put to the witness suggest that telling the truth does not amount to telling the whole truth, as the partial truth can easily obfuscate the whole truth and cause a miscarriage of justice. In other words, telling a partial truth can easily be the equivalent of concealing the truth, or simply, lying. The third condition suggests that even telling the whole truth can be misleading if delivered together with non-truth. The mixture of the whole truth and non-truth is also likely to cause injustice. The witness, in short, is required to adhere to his or her version of the whole truth, nothing more, nothing less.

A preponderance of criticism directed at Reading Lolita revolves around the confusion that the subtle distinction between the truth and the whole truth causes. As will be shown shortly, Nafisi
has been accused of leaving certain facts and truths out of the picture she draws, so as to make it consistent with a certain political ideology. Therefore, the trial of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* that Nafisi sets up to stump the enemies of literary truth, which in her view amounts to the free imagination, is held against her by the critics of *Reading Lolita*. The difference between these two trials is that Fitzgerald’s trial concerns interpretations. It is a rather innocuous battle between two different interpretations of the novel whose winner is almost obvious from the outset: the reader can rightly assume that the religious conservatives, the indisputable ‘bad guys’, are going to be trounced in Nafisi’s trial. The real world, however, rarely bestows such certainties upon people. By a substantial number of scholars, Nafisi has been brought to a more serious court.

Nafisi has frequently been criticized for having a selective memory and neglecting points that does not serve her purposes. Fatemeh Keshavarz is perhaps the most determined of the fact-checkers. She shows how not only are an entire group of characters, Muslim men in particular, are rendered ‘faceless’ in Nafisi’s account, but how ‘entire groups of Iranians who lived and produced significant work before, during, and after the revolution are totally erased from the image of Iran in RLT’ (Keshavarz 123). She provides a detailed list of prominent authors and intellectuals in contemporary Iran to rebut Nafisi’s sweeping assertion that ‘we live in a culture that denies any merit to literary works’ (Nafisi, *Lolita* 25). Another controversial point is the way in which Iranian women are portrayed in *Reading Lolita*. Nafisi subscribes to the inaccurate, yet commonplace, understanding in the West that Iranian women were happy and free under the Shah’s reign, before the Islamic government emerged and suffocated them by exercising Sharia law. That narrative has been debunked time and again, and Nafisi has been frequently criticised for the dismissive way in which she considers women’s movements in the post-revolutionary Iran (Donadey and Ahmad-Ghosh, M. Rastegar, Keshavarz). She tends to be suspicious of the efforts of Muslim women who engage in equal rights for women, which seems to be her main preoccupation: ‘It was then that the myth of Islamic feminism - a contradictory notion, attempting to reconcile the concept of women's rights with the tenets of Islam - took root’ (Nafisi *Lolita* 315).

When it comes to politics, the book is strikingly uninterested in the Western interventions that disrupted nascent democracies in Iran throughout the twentieth century, and blames the complications and troubles of the country on Iranians in general and Muslim men in particular. To some, this apparent historical bias was such that the book seemed like a political conspiracy,
particularly given its publication at such a volatile time, when a small spark could cause a catastrophic explosion. Hamid Dabashi, also using the term ‘selective memory’, argues that this narrative, driven by an ‘unfailing hatred of everything Iranian’ (Dabashi, Native), might have been written as a collaboration with American politicians keen to wage a war against Iran. Negar Mottahedeh sees Reading Lolita as an element of a larger cultural project which uses the memoirs of Iranian women for sinister purposes, and believes that it cannot be coincidental to see their financial 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 twenty-first century’ (Mottahedeh 9).

Nafisi has been relatively evasive about this flurry of criticism: ‘debate that is polarized isn’t worth my time’ (National Post) is her remark on Dabashi’s scathing attack. On rare occasions when she fights back, she takes a simple line of argument: ‘Some people criticized me and said, ‘Why didn’t you talk about Persian literature?’ I tell them that I was an English professor, this is what I studied’ (Nafisi, Open Spaces). One of her defenders points this out as well: ‘But he [Dabashi] thinks Nafisi unfairly ignores what came before, the tyrannical (U.S.-supported) Shah. Why didn't she turn her attention to that? (Probably because it wasn't her subject)’ (National Post). It might sound irresponsible to some, but there is a kernel of truth to this defence. To provide a list of the facts we would like to see in a memoir will ultimately fail to undermine the reliability of that account, since no book is exempt from such omissions, and grasping the ‘whole truth’ is an impossibility: ‘I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail’ (Lacan 3). Thus, when Nafisi claims that she omitted some facts simply because she was not interested in them, she has a point. Moreover, in the author’s note at the beginning of the book, she admits that her memory is prone to skewing the facts: ‘the facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful.’ In other words, she makes it clear that she does not strive to capture the whole truth. The truth, her truth, is to be narrated as far as she is concerned, so the accusation of omission, in her view, is futile.

However, to some, the impossibility of delivering the ‘whole truth’, if it existed at all, should not be used as an excuse to exempt selective memory from scrutiny. In other words, it is true that memory is selective by nature and by no means comprehensive, but precisely because of this selective nature, no memory is innocent. All memories invent the past and shape identities. In Edward Said’s words, memory is ‘very much something to be used, misused, or exploited, rather
than something that sits inertly there for each person to possess and contain’ (Said, *Memory* 179).

In this study, therefore, I will not focus on the left-out facts. The omitted facts of life and culture in Iran, the stories that counter Nafisi’s book, are not subjects of this study. The omissions have been discussed extensively, as the cited examples suggest. Here I am pursuing an analysis of what the book has to offer. I am interested in the ways in which the facts are organized to construct a compelling narrative, and through them, a certain image of Iran. Certain facts and stories are provided in this memoir, and arranged in a specific way. Such a selection and arrangement creates a world in the book, a place with people living and working in it, which has its own qualities and characteristics. I will focus on this world, and study how the spatiality of this world is presented, as well as the characters’ journey through this constructed space and their ways of accustoming themselves with it.

*The Carved Up Space: Tehran through the Window Frame*

*Reading Lolita* revolves around a room, very much like Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*. The study group of Nafisi and her students consider the room as the only safe zone, the sacrosanct space of liberty, where each can ‘become her own inimitable self.’ (6) There they do everything which the world outside has denied them. They discuss novels there, and in doing so turn the room into a ‘place of transgression,’ a ‘wonderland’ (10). One cannot help but be reminded of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, as is alluded to in the book by Mana, who describes Nafisi’s living room as ‘a sort of communal version of Virginia Woolf's room of her own’ (14). Indeed, Woolf’s motivation for writing her groundbreaking essay resembles Nafisi’s: one day, as Woolf is walking into a library, the guardian stops her, because: ‘The ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction’ (Woolf 9). Both women, one in the England of the early twentieth century and the other in the Iran of the late twentieth century, are banned from the public domain on the grounds of their gender, and consequently, both decide to devote their intellectual careers to fighting the patriarchal system that deprives them of their basic rights.

Like Nafisi, facing this outrageous discrimination, Woolf resorts to literature. She selects poetry, embarks on discussions of some length about her favorite poets, Tennyson and Milton in
particular, and intermittently fantasizes about manuscripts of the works of great English poets in the library. Woolf decides to explore the nature of the problem: ‘to answer that question I had to think myself out of the room, back into the past’ (13). Thus her intellectual journey begins: Woolf digs into her family history and castigates the women of previous generations who, rather than ‘powdering their noses,’ should have ‘learnt the great art of making money’ (22). She reads through the archives and unearths shocking documents about the poverty of women, their oppression and enslavement to men’s desire, and the consequences of this for their role in society.

Nafisi’s room, however, is a rather different place. Her description of the room is quite self-explanatory: she calls the living room ‘our world’, whose only connection to the outside is a window that frames the Elburz Mountains to the north. Nafisi herself would sit on a chair before an oval mirror, which reframes the already confined sight of her beloved mountains. The streets and people between the building and the mountain are censored from her view. She takes relief in this sight, or lack thereof:

That censored view intensified my impression that the noise came not from the street below but from some far-off place, a place whose persistent hum was our only link to the world we refused, for those few hours, to acknowledge (16).

In other words, the room is set up in such a way as to minimize the contact of its inhabitants with the world outside. Nafisi is anxious to stay away from that world, and replace it with the world of the English literary canon, a world uncontaminated by the ravages of Iranian society.

In doing so, the book engages in a spatial substitution. A migration occurs in the narrative, in both a physical and intellectual sense: a group of people move from one space, the city of Tehran with all its post-revolutionary tumult, into a room, while intellectually they abandon the political and social dynamic outside and lend their intellectual capacities almost entirely to the impeccability of Western masterpieces. Such a migration might seem progressive and liberating, but if one considers the spatiality of this move, conflicting notions arise from it: while throughout the book Western literature is promoted as a free world of beauty and perfection, the path to it passes through a circumscribed, detached space that, for one thing, shuts men out. That is to say, in order to save her ‘girls’ as she call them, Nafisi takes them from a risky open space full of adventures to a harem-like space of security and forgetfulness. It could be argued that the
room is not a space for escape, but rather, Nafisi’s method for negotiating a space for her and her students in the suppressive world they are bound to live in. However, there is little sign in the book to back up this argument. There must be at least a modicum of struggle or negotiation with the powers that be, something to prove that the narrator is, however remotely, interested in the struggle or in negotiation. The room is depicted as a place for resignation and aloofness all the way through, and these qualities, as the examples in this chapter will show, are emphasized over and over again. Rather than a negotiated space, the room is regarded as a sanctuary to protect its dwellers from the evil outside. While Woolf encourages struggle and negotiation, here we constantly read about keeping things at bay.

In that sense, while this space resembles the harem in *Persian Letters*, it is considerably different from it: the harem belongs to Usbek, and the women are his property. They initiate a riot to topple this oppressive structure and liberate themselves, and their action involves risk and courage. In *Reading Lolita*, the aim of constituting the reading space is taking solace in fiction, rejoicing in beauty and perfection in order to nurture the soul and keep it flourishing against all odds.

Her attitude, therefore, stands at odds with Woolf’s: Woolf thinks herself out of the room, reads herself out of social confinement in order to change it to her advantage. She has a clearly socio-political agenda in her essay. She passionately calls on other women to bring about a sea change in the distribution of power, to face the injustice wreaked on them and do something about it in the real world. Rather than wallowing in her favorite poems, she requires women to put making money at the top of their agenda and consider it even more important than suffrage, all the pressures and discriminations notwithstanding (37).

In that sense, Mana’s likening of Nafisi’s living room to Woolf’s idea of a room that women need in order to be writers, seems misguided. They are superficially similar, in the sense that they are spaces in which women deal with literature. Nafisi sets up the space in a way that eliminates the world ‘outside, underneath the window’ in order to protect herself and her students from the evil lurking around: ‘we were in that room to protect ourselves from the reality outside’ (72). The space of liberation is portrayed in the vein of John Ruskin’s *Queen’s Garden*, one of the emblematic texts of patriarchy, in which Ruskin invites women to regard themselves as flowers in their ‘gardens’, meticulously protected by ‘walls’ from the male world of work and
politics (Ruskin 160). Woolf, on the other hand, calls for the removal of such protection to expose women to hard work, to the effort required to earn a living, and to allow women to develop competence in political and social matters. She wants women never to shy from what men do, and refuses to shirk the fight to gain safety by retreating into a cloistered space.

The confinement to the circumscribed space is of course far from literal. When one lives in a metropolis, it is obviously impossible to limit one’s range of movement to a room. Nafisi does go out, and, consistent with her idea of the world outside as the realm of ‘bad witches and furies’ (29), she expresses a certain amount of agoraphobia. When she is at a demonstration for Taleghani’s funeral, and since she fails to find a familiar face, the space around her is dislocated: ‘the wide street in front of the university contracted and expanded to accommodate our movements’ (109). She has doubts about the very reality of the world outside: ‘Which of these two worlds was more real, and to which did we really belong? We no longer knew the answers’ (31). It is no surprise that she loves Iran the most when she imagines it without its people: when she decides to ‘shape other places according to [her] concept of Iran,’ she sets out to ‘Persianize the landscape’ by moving to New Mexico, and her description of home for her friends there has no humans in it: ‘this little stream surrounded by trees, meandering its way through a parched land, is just like Iran’ (99). Only during the bombardment of Tehran, when about a quarter of the population escaped and the city was deserted, she begins to see the charms of the city: ‘it had shed its vulgar veil to reveal a decent, human face’ (251). Overall, Tehran’s human face is divulged only when its humans are gone.

Despite all these inclinations, she has to go out and deal with this unreal space, where streets change size and things seem all too imaginary. In order to come to terms with the city, she designs a mechanism that enables her to understand and deal with the space of the city more easily. For want of a better phrase, I call this mechanism the simplification of space, which comes through a mutilation or carving-up, and that is the main characteristic of the spatial construction in this narrative. In order to grasp the chaotic life of people under the Islamic republic, she reduces the complexity down to certain spaces detached from each other, and describes each space in isolation. In doing so, not only is the whole lost, but the connections between various pieces of this space also remain unexplained. The result is a rather fragmented, scattered spatial construction which pretends to be representative of the whole, but is in fact a reaction to the enormity and ungraspability of the fluid space outside.
Her portrait of the university, the space where she spends most of her time before retreating into her living room, provides a good example of this mechanism. In her classroom, the front rows are occupied by devout Muslims, the main culprits of the book, deemed responsible for almost everything that has gone wrong. Then there are her favorite ones, ‘the most radical students,’ who ‘sit in the very back rows’ (114). There is no devout Muslim in that back row, just as no secular person sits among the Muslims. The second group of culprits are the leftists, who form another ‘immutable river’ in parallel with the Muslims. In the area between reside the non-political students, the ultimate victims of extremists on both sides.

In Nafisi’s representation of the space of the classroom, all the students are neatly divided along political lines, and barely anything but hostility occurs across those lines. There is no overlap, no common ground, no shift from one space to another. This is the pattern one can arguably extend to the rest of the book. Those divisions and categorizations define the spatiality of Iran in Reading Lolita. Politics has sliced up the space, and every group is confined to the space their political affiliation has set for them. In other words, complex spaces are rare to find in this narrative. Spaces function as separate islands inhabited by fundamentally different groups of people. Hardly any of these groups include someone from another island, and the waters between them seem deep and un navigable.

As we are talking about the spatial construction of a society, which includes the distribution of spaces in literary narrative, Jacques Rancière’s ideas on the distribution of the sensible, by which he means the distribution of everything that is captured by senses, are useful. In The Politics of Aesthetics, Rancière’s concern is figuring out ‘who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed’ (Rancière 12). Thus, his theory is partially about the way in which the social space is parceled out among different groups and communities. In Rancière’s view, the existing distribution of the sensible is the essence of the police. The job of the police force is to guard the partitions, to make sure that the current spatial distribution holds and the rules of inclusion and exclusion function in each separate space. The police force carries out ‘a distribution of what is visible and what is not, what can be heard and what cannot’ (36). In doing so, the police force constructs the community in such a way that every group stays tied to its assigned space, to the function defined for them.
To use this Rancierean language, one can say that protesting against the distribution of the sensible in post-revolutionary Iran is central to Nafisi’s book. *Reading Lolita* is essentially the memoir of a person who felt relatively comfortable with the distribution of the sensible under the Shah, until the revolution arrived and changed it all. The revolutionaries promised to include all those left out of the Shah’s structuring of public space. The victors reneged on their promise and replaced the Shah’s already unpleasant reign with a far more rigid and exclusive distribution of the sensible. They excluded too many people, including the author of *Reading Lolita* and those like her. That is the reason the spatial concerns are noticeable throughout the book: the question of the public and the private, the room and the world outside, the open space and the sheltered one.

The most blatant examples of this new oppressive regime of space appear when the new government literally divides the physical space according to gender, such as designing different entrances to the university for men and women, or separating couples with no legalized relationship in a café. Nafisi seems intent on rupturing this order, to reclaim the void that the police had eliminated. She is rightly angry at the senseless force that holds people away from each other, and pursues ways to turn the tide. In that, she shares the cause with almost all the dissidents of the time.

Her version is played out markedly at Gatsby’s trial: the students in the front row, made up entirely of Muslim men, make many stupid comments about the book, and the students in the back row, predominantly secular women, giggle them off and come out with brilliant comments to rebut them. Everybody plays in the space assigned to them, trapped in all the foreseeable clichés of Muslim men and secular women. Her portrayal of the trial leaves no possibility of creating a new order by dismantling the allocated space and declaring the new.

The same also applies to her geopolitical understanding of the space. The two countries most present in the book are America and Iran. The author, for the most part, lives physically in Iran but intellectually in the US, and stays in a state of non-belonging and uprootedness all along: ‘it was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile,’ (176) ‘some, like me, felt like aliens in their homeland’ (297). According to this view, the more similar to the US Iran is, the more livable it becomes. This is partially an extension of the Gatsby trial’s distribution of
space, one that imagines no possibility of a common ground, of a space in which secular women and Muslim men could get along.

Such a view, promulgated by many in both countries, strikingly neglects Iran’s geopolitical location in the world, which determines its cultural and religious identity. Dariush Shayegan in his Asia vs. West, scrutinizes this attitude. He argues that Iran, being located at the crossroad of Indian culture and the Islamic world, has fed off those cultures for centuries, and despite the recent dominance of Western culture, the Iranian interpretation of fundamental notions such as nature, human, and the afterlife bears much more resemblance to, say, Hinduism and Taoism than any Western school of thought. Iranians, in Shayegan’s view, like other people of the East, tend to neglect this co-dependence, because ‘these civilizations are alienated from each other and observe themselves through a Western lens’ (Shayegan 9, my translation). Shayegan admires Gandhi, since he was one of the few leaders of modern Asia who believed in an ‘Asian solution,’ a third way that cuts through the widespread fuss about importing Western democracies and, instead, seeks emancipation in the roots of Indian history and culture.

Nafisi tends to dismiss this geopolitical sensitivity. A one-to-one relationship between Iran and the US lies at the heart of this book, as though there is nothing in between. In Reading Lolita, the American version of democracy, its lifestyle and culture are taken as a measure to gauge the conditions of life in Iran. Just as her living room window censors out the city and its people to capture a pristine sight of Elburz mountain, her geopolitical window is set up to keep other neighbors and cultures out of sight.

Let us return to the spatiality of the narrative. The social space of Iran in Reading Lolita is depicted as a deadlock. In that way, in terms of the relationship between the society and its rulers, the book conveys a rather polarized image: isolated cells do whatever they are expected to do, and above them all presides an omnipotent sovereign who sees everything and oppresses every movement. Iran in Reading Lolita is a set of segments with isolated spaces at one end and the state at the other, and no space of maneuver in between, nothing remotely similar to a ‘complex space’, as we discussed in Persian Letters. Some of those intermediate organizations that complicated the space in post-revolutionary Iran are named in the book, only to be demonized (leftists) or disdained (Islamic feminism). Nafisi prefers a particular picture of Iran, in which nothing stands between the state and the citizen, in order to advance the idea of political
resignation and disappearance into the world of Western literature that comes through her method of reading those texts which, apart from sporadic references to stories as tools to understand what happens in Iran, is largely based on the appreciation of their literary perfection. The notion of resignation will be discussed in the last section of this chapter. Before that, it is necessary to complete the picture by a study of characterization, to see how people operate within the space constructed.

People without Backgrounds
Dabashi’s Al-Ahram article, despite its enraged tone and heavy-handed jargon, raises important issues. One of them is the controversial cover of the book. On the cover of Reading Lolita one sees two Iranian veiled girls looking down, reading something cut out of the frame. The background is white and blank, and above their heads comes the title of the book, Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books. Dabashi has unearthed the original photo: ‘the original picture from which this cover is excised is lifted off a news report during the parliamentary election of February 2000 in Iran. In the original picture, the two young women are in fact reading the leading reformist newspaper Mosharekat’ (Dabashi, Native).

The picture is cropped and the background, which contains other students and a picture of former president Mohammad Khatami, is removed. These women are looking down like two head-scarved figures in a void, with no background or indication of what they are looking at. Nafisi has denied having any role in choosing the cover page, which does not change the fact that the cover is an indispensable part of the book and influences the reading. For Dabashi, on the other hand, the cover page is the ultimate example of the imperialist cynicism running through Reading Lolita.

To approach the cover page from another angle, let me borrow two notions from Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida. Barthes finds two elements in pictures: studium and punctum. Studium is the thing in a picture that appeals to the general interest of the observer, the elements that draw the beholder’s attention as someone interested in the subject or background of the picture in general: ‘it is culturally (this connotation is present in studium) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions’ (Barthes 26). Punctum is the unexpected, the thing that breaks the uniformity of the studium. Punctum is the element that, as Barthes puts it: ‘rises from
the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’ (26). Punctum is, as it were, the prong of the picture, something that stings and creates shock.

On the cover page of Reading Lolita, the punctum is obviously these young veiled women looking down, as Dabashi points out. But there is something more: the cover picture has no studium. The background, which would have drawn the attention of the interested person, is totally removed, and the original picture is reduced to a mere punctum. I believe that the blank space above the figures’ head is more indicative of the central idea of this book than the downward-looking students, and the absence of studium is as charged with connotations as the highlighting of the punctum. The cropped picture suggests that the context within which these figures are operating is unimportant, perhaps irrelevant, and having two heads against the blank space suffices for conveying the message, whatever it may be.

The cue for this cover may have been taken from first pages of the book. Nafisi’s first reminiscence is prompted by two pictures she has brought over to the US: in the first one the women in the study group are veiled, in the second unveiled; in both they are ‘standing against a white wall’ (4). She begins with the latter, and introduces the students one by one. The introduction is strictly limited to their bodily presence in the picture, with some passing indications as to their personalities. They are dubbed names such as ‘my lady’, ‘comedian’, ‘the wild one’, and apart from their behavior in the study group and their appearance we learn little about them. Nafisi believes we do not need much more anyway, since ‘the second photograph belonged to the world inside the living room’ (29), which is, as it turns out, the world she cares about far more than other worlds. The other world or worlds, the ones people call reality and live in, for her is a dreadful land of the frightening and the bizarre, where ‘the bad witches and furies were waiting to transform us into the hooded creatures of the first [picture]’ (29). The cropped picture of the cover, therefore, accords with her perspective on her students: she does her best to keep them away from the life ‘underneath the window’ and prompt them into the fantasy world the novels are purported to offer. The world out there creates backgrounds, studiums that tend to be far less impeccable than art, and she is not quite interested in that. She prefers to see her students against the white wall, with no real context that complicates their journey into the world of imagination.
Above all, Nafisi is determined to portray herself in this contextless way. She foregrounds her aloofness constantly, and throughout the book, never ceases to emphasize that she is not part of the story, but is rather the observer of its unfolding. She is convinced that the problems with which Iranians struggle are not hers. Such an attitude stands out when she has to do something along with other people, or when, for any reason, she is part of a crowd. When the rumors about the compulsory wearing of the veil begin to be realized, she cancels class to go to a meeting, but she emphasizes that ‘I was involved in what I considered to be a defense of myself as a person,’ rather than ‘an unknown entity called the ‘oppressed masses’’ (134). During a student vigil in the early nineties she runs into one of her former students, and responding to his question about what she makes of the situation, she says: ‘what I think is becoming increasingly irrelevant,’ because, as she realizes later when pondering over her response, ‘all of a sudden I felt as if this was not my fight’ (181). Before her thoughts become irrelevant, shortly after the revolution, she participates in a demonstration for Ayatollah Taleghani’s funeral, and being in a crowd of strangers makes her nervous. The demonstration is massive and tense, so she is forced to move senselessly, ‘swaying to the beat of the crowd,’ which turns out to be so unbearable that, as she says, ‘I found myself beating my fists against a tree and crying, crying, as if the person closest to me had died’ (109). This intense reaction, as far as we are informed, happens only because there are no familiar faces around her. Examples like this abound in the text, and at each turn of events, Nafisi points out that she has remained untouched by the world around her, that the only world she belongs to is that of literary imagination. Inspired by Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading, she likens participation in social life in a totalitarian country to ‘dancing with your jailer,’ which is ‘an act of utmost brutality.’ To avoid this, she believes that one has to ‘find a way to preserve one’s individuality’ (93). In doing so, she carves out a position for herself as an outsider, someone who purports to be immune to the aggressive political and ideological forces around her.

In Nafisi’s judgment, other characters in her narrative are not strong enough to steer clear of their jailors. Nafisi takes herself out of the equation and watches the life of others on the ground, but she narrates those lives without their studium, without all the complexities that those people’s backgrounds bring to bear on their situation. Even when she tells the stories of her students, to whom she is quite close, she never leaves her safe citadel: ‘I had never set foot in their houses,’
so ‘I could never place or locate their private narrative within a context, a locality’ (71). As a result, we see the students, oftentimes, against the white wall.

Let us discuss her students. After the initial introduction, in the course of the book we incrementally receive information about their lives. At the first encounter, they come into the room one by one. Mahshid is the first. She has spent some time in jail, which cost her a kidney and caused a slew of recurrent nightmares. Mana’s father has died of a heart attack, and their house has been confiscated by the government. Sanaz’s life is a series of mishaps and abuses, from warnings by street patrols to ‘being harassed by bearded and god-fearing men’ (32), not to mention her conservative family, especially her aggressive brother. Yassi’s mother and aunt had to go underground after the revolution. She was a rebel herself and abandoned her family to pursue her own interests, which caused her festering migraines and sleepless nights. She is so disappointed by her life that cannot imagine being with real men: ‘for her a man always existed in books […] even in the books there were few men for her’ (39). The ‘girls’ are utterly inexperienced and confined, ‘they were never free of the regime’s definition of them as Muslim women’ (33). They have been humiliated throughout their lives: ‘most of these girls have never had anyone praise them for anything’ (267). They are particularly alien to their bodies, and, as Nassrin, herself a victim of child abuse by her Arabic teacher, says, ‘we know nothing, nothing, about the relation between a man and a woman, about what it means to go out with a man’ (359).

Overall, the young women of the book have one thing in common: their lives are bereft of any moment of happiness. They are depicted as a completely despondent group, trapped between the rock of religious totalitarianism and the hard place of a backward conservative society, and except for the time they spend with their teacher to delve into Western masterpieces, they experience virtually no moment of delight. Their life is quite simple, black and white: the pure joy of literature versus the sheer misery of reality. In fact, their life is so unbearable that they have to resort to Western literature in order to rediscover that they ‘were also living, breathing human beings’ (30).

In Nafisi’s memoir, the male characters are numerous. They range from ultra conservatives to established intellectuals, from misogynist religious devotees to liberals sympathetic to feminism. Such a vast spectrum, however, falls into neat categories, each containing a specific cast of characters with barely any common ground with people from other categories.
It is hard to find good men in this book. The list of the terrible begins with Nafisi’s first husband: a man ‘so sure of himself’, ‘insanely jealous’ and ‘success-oriented’ who abused and restricted her disturbingly. She finally divorces, but stays on the university campus in the US as a student, while forgoing ‘the company of the Iranian community, especially men’ (100). Her students’ partners and relatives are not much better. Azin’s first husband interestingly resembles Nafisi’s own husband: he is ‘jealous of her books, her computer and her Thursday mornings’ (327), he beats her on a regular basis and verbally abuses her. Sanaz’s brother is violent and possessive. So is Nassrin’s father, and almost all of the ‘girls’ have had relationships with abusive partners.

Yassi’s large family is representative: she has three aunts, who are ‘the backbone of the family’, quite intelligent and hard-working, yet all three of them have to ‘put up with spoiled, nagging husbands, inferior to them intellectually and in every other way.’ The main cast of male villains appears at the University of Tehran as her colleagues and students: Professor X, one of the few teachers we read about, the ‘favorite villain’ of Nafisi and her students, is a resentful brute who holds a grudge against whoever disagrees with him, and who ‘had a thing about young girls spoiling the life of intellectual men’ (84). Nafisi’s male students are probably the worst: Mr Ghomi has dodged the war but now enjoys ‘undeserved privileges’, and when he does not like a writer such as Henry James, rather than a rational argument, he apparently just makes noise and insults the author (234). He fails to comprehend the basics of literature, and childishly takes pleasure in the death of the character of Daisy Miller, since he holds a firm conviction that the morally or sexually corrupt must die (238). Mr. Nahvi is slightly more intelligent, but obsessed with ‘Western decadence’, and is calmer because ‘there were no doubts in him’ (233). He does read, but the outcome is disappointing. He misunderstands almost everything, most notably Edward Said, for he believes that Jane Austen is a colonialist writer who writes about trivial things like marriage. Mr Forsati is a pure opportunist whose only goal in life is ‘getting ahead’ (233), and when he shows any interest in culture, ‘it is only to be a Roman in Rome’ (248). The lack of literary taste is the most egregious flaw they share, which sometimes takes ridiculous forms. Mr. Nyazi, for example, reads The Great Gatsby as a pamphlet for a certain kind of lifestyle, and in the trial sympathizes with Gatsby’s killer with a funny remark: ‘He is the only victim. He is the genuine symbol of the oppressed, in the land of, of, of the Great Satan!’ (153). The list of illogical, irascible Iranian men in the book is quite long.
There do exist, however, a few good men in the book. Two of the men are crucial to the author’s life: Nafisi’s second husband, Bijan, and the magician, Nafisi’s mysterious guru.

Bijan makes surprisingly few appearances in the book, and when he does, his role is often marginal. He is described as a rather calm and withdrawn man with admirable restraint. When they see the news of the execution of their former comrades on the TV, Bijan ‘would rarely show any emotion. He’d sit on the couch, his eyes glued to the television screen, seldom moving a muscle’ (122). That is his usual position in the book: sitting on the sofa, drinking and watching the BBC or reading a novel, revealing little of his thoughts. His presence becomes more significant towards the end of the book, particularly when they debate staying in Iran or leaving for the US. His point of view is represented now and then, and we know that ‘he is more rooted to the idea of home’ than leaving. However, ‘Bijan was most articulate in his silences.’ His silence is such that through him Nafisi ‘learned the many moods and nuances of silence: the angry silence and the disapproving one’ (397).

The magician’s presence is more dominant, and somewhat uncanny. He is extremely disappointed by the way in which events have unfolded in Iran, and has decided to live a totally insular life. Nafisi’s description of his lifestyle intensifies this insularity, and makes him look more like an apparition than a human being. To begin with, unlike other characters, he does not bear a surname and remains ‘the magician’ throughout. He takes on mysterious characteristics, similar to sectarian gurus: ‘he saw only a select few, […] at night if the light in one of his rooms facing the street was on, it was a sign that he would see visitors; otherwise they should not bother him’ (209). He subsists on tea and chocolate, and his half-empty refrigerator contains as much as is needed to serve his guests. It is implied several times that he holds a beyond-earthly knowledge of things: ‘He talked as if he knew me, as if he knew not only the known facts but also the unknown mysteries’ (210), ‘photographs can be deceptive, unless, like my magician, one has the gift of discovering something from the curve of a person’s nose’ (327). He has read almost everything ever published, knows answers to almost all the dilemmas of the world. He has an ‘immaculate library,’ even his box of chocolates is embossed with ‘immaculate squares of red with black lettering’ (210). He does not drink, does not watch TV or go to movies. This is how he sums up his own existence in Iran: ‘I don’t lose, I don’t win. In fact, I don’t exist. You see, I have withdrawn not just from the Islamic Republic but from life as such’ (219).
Among the very few bearable men in the book, Bijan and the magician are the most noticeable ones, and they have something in common: they are strikingly quiet, aloof to the point of invisibility. In this way, they are the other side of the coin of ‘bad’ men: just as the coarseness and crudity of other men is clear-cut and unquestionable, the goodness of the acceptable ones amounts to their near absolute detachment and disengagement. In Nafisi’s characterization, even though these two categories of men are diametrically opposed, they have one important thing in common: the men of *Reading Lolita* are formal, one-dimensional, and unreasonably uncomplicated.

We have, therefore, a group of miserable students who barely experience a moment of happiness, a bunch of annoying religious men who know nothing about the modern world, a few modern men who stay far away from reality, and a narrator who stands above them all, fights for herself and is barely affected by anything around her. Such an attitude stands at odds with her opinion on story-telling, and with the ideas being preached throughout the book: she admires James for the ambiguity of his characters, for the way he leaves the reader ‘out in the cold’ (239) by ascribing unexpected qualities to characters at every turn. She believes that ‘the respect for others, empathy, lies at the heart of the novel’, and defines the fictional villain as a character ‘without compassion, without empathy’ (271). Yet, when she comes to write about real life characters, she writes with no compassion for a large proportion of Iranian men.

In fact, despite her frequent expression of allegiance to the Western canon, to a certain extent Nafisi replicates the most usual pattern of characterization in modern Persian literature, embodied most famously in Sadeq Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*. Hedayat’s short novel is divided into two sections, each revolving around a woman. The first female character is ‘the ethereal.’ She is otherworldly, untouchable, to the extent that the narrator ‘shall never utter her name’, since ‘she no longer belongs to this mean, cruel world’ (8). The narrator doubts whether she is an angel or a woman, since she ‘had within her something that transcended humanity’ (19). In the second part, however, he wakes up into a new world, and here he has to deal with a different woman, the almost complete opposite of the former. She is ‘the bitch,’ has ‘lovers right and left’, and being in love with her is ‘inseparable from filth and death’ (59). She demonstrates sadistic inclinations, and tortures the narrator psychologically however she can.
This of course is not an idiosyncrasy of Iranian literature in the twentieth century. Sigmund Freud has aptly shown the recurrence of the Madonna/whore dichotomy throughout the history of human culture. However, in modern Persian literature, due to the inevitable shadow of The Blind Owl in which this dichotomy is pivotal, such an image has been repeated with considerable frequency. Almost every prominent writer in modern Iran has responded to it in his or her own way. The characterization of women has been a recurrent aspect of this response, and one can easily trace the dualities of the ethereal/the bitch replicated in major works of the twentieth century in Iran, like the works of Sadeq Choobak, Ahmad Mahmoud, and Houshang Golshiri. In the nineties, however, awareness of this continuous replication became commonplace, and Iranian writers set out consciously to leave it behind. A key text in this development is Reza Baraheni’s essay titled ‘Rewriting The Blind Owl’, where he calls for doing away with this structure: ‘Rewriting The Blind Owl amounts to giving voice to the women of The Blind Owl and other women across the spectrum between ‘the ethereal’ and ‘the bitch’, which the narrator’s mind constructs’ (Baraheni, my translation).

Over the last two decades, the number of female writers in Iran has increased remarkably, and the literary landscape is now populated by a variety of female characters who do have a voice. This development has rendered this duality obsolete. Nafisi, however, seems to eagerly tap into it: she takes the structure, turns it on its head by changing the gender of the people, and molds them into the same duality: the men of Reading Lolita are categorized as ‘the ethereal’ and ‘the bitch’ with barely anything in between: the almost otherworldly magician who embodies all that is immaculate and flawless, the withdrawn husband who is articulate in his muteness, versus the bunch of crude, jealous, oppressive, annoying men, who scarcely demonstrate anything acceptable.

*The Politics of Resignation: An Avenue toward Disappearance*

The author of Reading Lolita consistently reminds the reader throughout the book that she is against political activities, and preaches an escape into literary perfection and sublime aesthetics in the hard times. In the deeply politicized world of post-revolutionary Iran, she barely misses a chance to attack participants in what she takes to be a no-win situation. She relentlessly censures Islamists and leftists for bringing about the post-revolutionary disaster. By pointing to those she blames the most she gives a hint about her relation to politics, for in the context of Iran at this
time, probably the only thing a leftist and an Islamist would have had in common was their commitment to political engagement. In her class, she sympathizes the most with ‘non-political students’ (114), and throughout the book adamantly preaches political disengagement. Even though she has increasingly ‘become irrelevant,’ (182) she is not interested in reclaiming her voice and prefers to stand aside, to be amongst her students within the protective walls of the living room.

However, despite frequent reminders of her dislike of politics, her stance in the book is quite political, since non-interventionism is indeed a political position. In fact, Nafisi herself articulates her stance in conspicuously political terms:

I understood then that this resignation was perhaps, under the circumstances, the only form of dignified resistance to tyranny. We could not openly articulate what we wished, but we could by our silence show our indifference to the regime's demands (183).

Nafisi holds a clearly political idea of what she stands for: her refusal of involvement is in fact directed toward change and is meant to be a form of ‘resistance to tyranny’, hence innately political. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to examine Reading Lolita in terms of the efficiency of its political strategy, which she calls ‘resignation’, or ‘active withdrawal from a reality that had turned hostile’ (13). Discussing the politics of the book reveals another dimension of its construction of Iran, which supplements our study of spatiality and characterization up to this point.

Nafisi enacts this idea in a game she invents to soothe herself after being searched outrageously by a female guard. She decides to find a way to make her body invisible, and comes up with a peculiar chador game:

My constant obsession with the veil had made me buy a very wide black robe that covered me down to my ankles, with kimono-like sleeves, wide and long. I had gotten into the habit of withdrawing my hands into the sleeves and pretending that I had no hands. Gradually, I pretended that when I wore the robe, my whole body disappeared: my arms, breasts, stomach and legs melted and disappeared and what was left was a piece of cloth the shape of my body that moved here and there, guided by some invisible force (202).
The game is obviously a practice in invisibility, an attempt to demonstrate full resignation and aloofness, to the extent that affects the very materiality of her body. The game goes beyond political disengagement, and suggests the ideal state of living under the Islamic Republic as lack of bodily presence, or a radical detachment from reality. The detachment becomes more of an issue as she invents new stages for the game: she refrains from touching ‘hard surfaces, especially human beings’. The whole game is clearly based on the idea of resignation: justifiably outraged by the violation of her basic rights over her body, she resists the tyranny by vanishing. She strives to remain untainted by avoiding everything touched by the system, so as to demonstrate her indifference to their impositions.

This juxtaposition of highbrow literature with taking a firm isolationist position raises a question: Reading Lolita is a book about reading books, as well as a book on political resignation as a preferred lifestyle. How are these two strands spliced together? In other words, what can literature offer to someone determined to take no part in the politics of the environment she lives in?

Disappearance, of course, means leaving the current situation, not the abolition of the body. Nafisi wants to leave the reality she is trapped in, but in order for that to happen, she must go somewhere. Literature is this ‘somewhere’: the idea of radical disengagement, exemplified in the chador game episode, is realized through carving out a space for the detached body to enter. The Western literary canon in Reading Lolita is meant to be that space, and reading novels the device by which those in the living room travel to this other realm. But what kind of reading makes that possible? In other words, how should one read and treat literature in order to utilize it as a vehicle of disappearance?

There are several reasons that made this book appealing to so many at the time. After all, it carefully incorporates all the motifs that in the context of Iran-West relationships satisfy expectations from such a book: it is a first-hand account in which the main characters are cast as victims of an oppressive regime, it places its faith in the power of literature, it engages with gender politics and the liberation of women. Moreover, there is yet another coincidence that helped the popularity of Reading Lolita in the early years of this century: among other things, it is a story of a book club published at the advent of book clubs in the US. One figure is of course pivotal to this boom: Oprah Winfrey. One cannot help but take note of this simultaneity,
especially given that *Reading Lolita* ‘has been heavily marketed by its publisher, Random House, to women’s book groups’ (Burwell). This coincidence has been noticed by a number of scholars. Georgiana Banita argues that the success of the book relates partly to ‘the timely publication of the memoir which coincides with a proliferation of female book clubs and book groups under the lasting impact of Oprah Winfrey’s groundbreaking achievements in the field’ (Banita 88). The pedagogical characteristic that the readings of Winfrey and Nafisi share has also been discussed. (Kulbaga; Donadey and Ahmed Ghosh). In her passionate review, Geraldine Brooks points out: ‘anyone who has ever belonged to a book group must read this book’ (Brooks). Mona Simpson, in a review interestingly titled ‘Book Group in Chador’, also praises the book for its exploration of the pleasures and pains of reading literature in dire circumstances. Even Nafisi herself has lauded Oprah’s book club: ‘For a while it seemed like the only one who was talking about classics in America was Oprah, and I’m happy she did so’ (Nafisi, *Open Space*).

To discuss what the Oprah book club can tell us about *Reading Lolita*, let us first take a brief look at what the Oprah book club was and did. Oprah Winfrey launched the book club in 1996, and introduced books on a monthly basis for viewers to read. The show discussed seventy books altogether, seemingly from various strands of literary life. However, Eva Illouz finds a sort of consistency in Oprah’s choices: except for a few, all the novels have a female protagonist, who is typically born in harsh circumstances and undergoes traumatic experiences, but ultimately struggles through (Illouz 104). The whole journey of the characters in those texts is also a self-discovery, during which the protagonists learn to guard their individuality in the face of ‘a severe threat to their identity caused by the plagues publicized in the present time’ (109). In other words, Oprah’s chosen novels tell stories of victimized characters that rely primarily on themselves to survive. Oprah demands that her viewers take those lessons to heart and act accordingly as diligently as possible. Her idea of reading strategies is thus quite pragmatic and predicated on ‘carry-over’ (145): narratives must be used by readers, to help them to overcome their perils and build themselves. Herein lies, according to Janice Peck, the ideological message of Oprah Winfrey’s book club: ‘the valorization of a particular form of subjectivity through the act of ‘reading literature’’ (Peck 187). In other words, the potentially democratic act of reading, which sets a perfect platform for debate and exchange of ideas, is employed rather
undemocratically to promote a certain type of subjectivity, which turns out to belong to ‘none other than Winfrey herself’ (188).

How does Nafisi understand reading literature? What are her reading strategies? Similarities with Winfrey’s outlook are striking. Nafisi also believes in the practical benefits of reading literature, albeit in a rather different way. She also chooses books for her reading group unilaterally, but her criteria are slightly different: ‘their author’s faith in the critical and almost magical power of literature’ (Nafisi, Lolita 22), as opposed to the Winfrey-inspired search for something tangible readers ought to come away with and utilize in their everyday life. Nafisi seeks the ostensible absolute freedom that novels offer, so that readers can travel to them from their circumscribed spaces. Nafisi tends to attribute marvelous qualities to her selected novels and reads them as flawless objects that a genuine reader could only admire. She understands those novels to be so detached from the mundane that they are ‘an escape from reality’ (45), ‘golden emissaries from that other world’ (265). Thus the impact these novels make on the reader is seen as one of ecstatic disengagement, having to do more with magic than with practical matters. Unlike Winfrey’s insistence on taking novels as blueprints for engineering a certain form of self, Nafisi sees them running in parallel with reality, a safe haven for the damaged soul, a distant resort for the fatigued.

Therefore, although both Nafisi and Winfrey believe in the use of literature as panacea for the self, their versions of this ‘self’ differ markedly. According to Peck, Winfrey subscribes to the idea of the ‘strong self’, one capable of standing up and moving on in the face of all problems, one who blames herself for the miseries she suffers. Winfrey propagates a certain kind of change whereby one leaves the system intact, lays the problem at one’s own door, and trains oneself into becoming another person, someone better fitting the requirements of the system. Nafisi also rejects any effort to change the system. Instead, she believes in the sacrosanct superiority of individuals, and novels are seen as nurturing this notion with their sublime beauty and perfection. Despite the disparity over the kind of self the chosen novels promote, Winfrey and Nafisi agree on the idea of staying away from society as a whole and forgoing any attempt toward large-scale changes. In both cases, the emphasis is put on the individual woman, and her ability to lift herself up from the misery. In both versions, the system, which is often the main culprit for the misery of embattled women, remains untouched. For Nafisi, post-revolutionary Iran is simply too backward and hopeless to touch, and the best way to deal with it is to keep away from it. For
Oprah, the political and economic system is somewhat irrelevant to what happens to women, and each is responsible for lifting herself out of the mire. Both attitudes, in this sense, demonstrate a neoliberal tendency towards the idealization of the power of the individual.

As Janice Peck shows adeptly, despite its universal veneer, Winfrey’s show illustrates Bill Clinton’s rendition of neoliberalism, dominant in the US at the time the show gained currency (Peck 104). Nafisi’s Reading Lolita is no less deeply rooted in a certain ideological understanding of Iranian society, dominant in the Western media after the Islamic Revolution: a rigid gridlock with no space for maneuver, no possibility of redemption, so hopelessly stuck that the only way to survive in it is resorting to individual solutions. While this view conveys a large part of the reality, it cuts all the resistance movements out of the picture. In Reading Lolita such an image of Iran is deployed to set the ground for, among other things, exploring a theory of reading literature according to which novels should take the reader away from political engagement.

Conclusion
Reading Lolita is interspersed with comments on the excellence of the Western canon, and takes pity on what she considers the impoverished literary experience of Iranians whose country denies ‘any merit to literary works’ (25). Even though Nafisi advocates this as a personal experience, her approach is a clear replication of the all too familiar and yet outdated notion of the intrinsic supremacy of Western literature, and thereby contributes to establishing, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1). In the introduction to their well-known book, Hobsbawm considers ‘repetition’ as the main force of establishing and naturalizing certain perceptions and behaviors. In other words, invented traditions ‘seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ (2). It follows that, even if the Reading Lolita was written in absolute sincerity, it nevertheless repeats a considerable number of invented traditions within which Muslim men, Muslim women, and the cultural landscape of Iran have been perceived in the West. As a result, even though the book might well be factually true, the way in which the facts are chosen and set out makes it a contribution to invented traditions that have preceded Reading Lolita and formed a comprehensive image of the Middle East for Western readers.
To conclude this chapter, let me draw a comparison between *Reading Lolita* and another canonical American novel, although from a strand of the canon Nafisi never teaches in her classes. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the relationship between the protagonist and early twentieth century American society resembles that of Nafisi and Iranian society: the narrator, a black man from the southern states, is rendered invisible: ‘I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me’ (3). When Nafisi points out her ‘irrelevancy’ she has a fairly similar idea of exclusion: a society that refuses to see her, to recognize her existence. Ellison’s character goes through a painful and dangerous process to make himself, and by extension his community, visible. He uses the education he receives, including long hours of reading books, as a street orator and community organizer to give voice to the excluded and make them visible. In *Reading Lolita*, however, reading literature functions as the engine of invisibility, and in that sense it oddly complies with the line of the authorities: one reads novels in order to disappear, which helps fulfill the project the Islamic regime or any other totalitarian state has laid out for its people.

In *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi portrays an Iran that bolsters the necessity of such disappearance: a minority of ‘good’ people (secular, cultural, Westernized) is faced with a majority of ‘bad’ people (Muslims, leftists, closed-minded), with virtually no ground in between. Characters barely evolve in the course of the book, and a dynamic person who develops into a new stage of being is hard to find. In keeping with this static population, the space is also compartmentalized into various sections, each allocated to a certain part of the society. Just as no conversation takes place among people, insurmountable barriers separate spaces, and no possibility of linking up indoors and outdoors, public and private, seems to exist.

It may be correct that *Reading Lolita* eloquently explores the ‘transformative power of fiction,’ (Kakutoni) but the transformation turns out to lead to disempowerment. Fiction in this book is used to render the idea of real change obsolete and pointless. Under the veneer of big names in English literary canon, *Reading Lolita* reproduces the dominant clichés about post-revolutionary Iran, and uses them as a backdrop for her theory of resignation through reading. Such an idea forms the spatial construction of Iran in *Reading Lolita*: it is, in a way similar to *Persian Letters*, a place of entrapment and oppression, but unlike *Persian Letters*, no possibility of breaking out is conceivable. While Usbek’s wives began a purposeful negotiation with the despot to
undermine his harem, the women of Reading Lolita seek an imaginary world to inhabit, waiting for the hard times to pass.
Chapter Seven
Discussion

This study began with a note of caution: I did not intend to provide a historical continuum, nor show the evolution of any pattern of spatial representation of Iran. From the outset, I have emphasized that the corpus of literary texts written about Iran by Western authors over almost three centuries, given the broad concept of literature I have adopted in this project, is too large to be studied in a dissertation. Therefore, the word ‘snapshot’ was used to explain how I have looked at those works: rather than looking for an overarching explanation that puts forth a grand historical narrative to explain how a construction has evolved, I have selected four points on this continuum, four rather different texts from different historical periods that, at least at first glance, have little to do with each other. Going back to the introduction, Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope speaks to this approach. In an attempt to coalesce the study of temporality with that of spatiality in his theory of literature, Bakhtin seeks out the centres in the narrative where such a coalescence occurs, points of the narrative without which it falls apart: ‘The chronotope is the place where the knots of the narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative’ (Bakhtin 250). To use Bakhtin’s language, this study was dedicated to the finding of those places, where lines of narrative clash and create knots: the harem in Persian Letters, boundaries in Hajji Baba, graphic milieus in Persepolis, and the study room in Reading Lolita. These knots enable the reader to move across periods with some ease, while still considering the historical contexts and taking the risk of comparing texts born in very different contexts.

In every chapter, I have stayed as close to each text as possible, and kept to a minimum discussions around subjects such as the author’s background or international relations at the time of publication. While being aware of the time gaps that separate these books, I have focused on understanding the internal structure of the books and on analysing them individually in terms of the particular spatial construction of Iran/Persia each literary narrative creates, as well as of the potential points of similarity that connect these books across centuries and engender unexpected dialogues. Such an approach also sheds a new light on the study of characters, since now we see them as operators within a specifically constructed space. The range of their movement and what
they do is intertwined with the ways in which the spatiality of Persia/Iran is constructed in each case.

At first glance, it seems counter-intuitive that these books might demonstrate any significant shared attitude towards Iran. After all, what is the likelihood of finding any resemblance between an early nineteenth century picaresque tale written by an English diplomat who unabashedly disliked Persia under Qajar rule, and a turn of millennium graphic novel written by a French-Iranian woman who seems to be quite fond of her homeland? The intuitive answer, partially given the dominance of historicism in the field, would be a categorical ‘no’. This also applies to the other books considered in this study, which all seem, on the surface at least, to be quite different from each other.

However, having studied these examples individually, and then juxtaposing them for a comparative discussion, this study reveals that there are striking similarities in the ways in which Iran and Iranians are construed in these texts. Since the spatiality of Iran is the main concern of this thesis, what I notice in terms of similarities comes down largely to the question of spatial construction. The leading characters also demonstrate substantial similarities, especially in terms of the ways in which they navigate the restrictions and troubles this spatial construction imposes on them.

In this chapter, I shall tease out those similarities with respect to both spatial construction and characterization. Here I break down my findings into three points, and discuss three qualities shared by these books in one way or another. First, all four books do away with neatly linear narrative, which paves the way for a spatial study. Second, there are two main spatial patterns under which one can study these texts, and each spatial pattern is depicted in its near extreme form. Third, as for the characters, in the course of each narrative they struggle to survive within the difficulties of the space.

Non-linear Time

Literary cartography is not necessarily dependent on the ways in which a narrative is organized. It can be applied to any text to various degrees, since it regards the literary narrative as a mapmaking process. However, it will be more pertinent to a text that deliberately avoids putting its narrative in linear time and instead creates narrative spaces in which readers can move back
and forth and develop their interpretation as a multi-dimensional construction. In the current project, all four books evade linear time in narrative in a quite calculated and persistent way, which makes the implementation of this theoretical model all the more relevant. In other words, this project discusses the books that construct their narratives as a space rather than as a line, and this provides room for readers to move in multiple directions.

*Persian Letters* is a collection of epistles, and the very choice of this form is an indication of the writer’s inclination to digress, as in other epistolary examples, from Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. In this particular case, however, digressions are such that, as discussed in Chapter Two, many have taken it upon themselves to find the chain that holds these letters together and makes this book coherent. In *Persian Letters*, discussions about religious determinism are merged with observations about everyday life in French society and the Western way of governing a country or a personal space, and this is interspersed with the Harem letters. It is a rather colorful patchwork of various ideas and stories that lends itself to no specific order. Hence, the diversified scholarship around the book: as discussed in Chapter Two, this book has been studied from strikingly different angles, and in most of them the story of the harem, which constitutes about one-fourth of it, is largely neglected. Apart from the dominant understanding of this novel as a book about France, the undetermined and flexible structure Montesquieu devised for the narrative, in which it is possible to read it in many different ways, has led many to dismiss Persia as a worthy component of the narrative. I have focused on the generally overlooked space of the harem in this project, one that thrives along with other spaces in the novel.

*Hajji Baba* is also a novel that defies linear order. Hajji Baba is forced to live a chaotic life, and in order to survive, he is always on the lookout to escape. He thus takes all the fleeting chances to change his appearance or demeanour entirely in order to survive. As a result, our expectations as readers are also aborted, since no situation comes to a satisfying resolution throughout the novel. We wander around with him in the hope of a settlement that never arrives. The non-linearity of the narrative is such that the character changes himself somewhat dramatically along with events: Hajji Baba, the passionate lover, is barely recognizable as the torturer who turns up several chapters later. The novel never offers a development of the character in a conventional sense, so rather than following the character, the reader jumps around with him, enters situation after situation without understanding the link that might put these situations in a particular order.
As a result, similar to *Persian Letters*, this novel constructs a narrative space rather than a narrative time. It allows the reader to travel through it at different speeds and in different orders, and to capture Hajji Baba through a process of putting pieces together and completing the picture, rather than through teleological development.

The linearity of the narrative in *Persepolis* is also quite weak and further undermined by the fragmentation inherent in the form of the graphic novel. Such a quality, however, is less visible than other cases, since it gives a fairly strong sense of growing up. In a sense, as discussed in Chapter Three, Marji’s life is not altogether different from Hajji Baba’s: she is thrown from one situation to another, and moves around in the hope of a settled life which she never achieves. However, her personal response differs from that of Hajji Baba: she holds onto certain moral principles and does her best never to renege on her promises to herself and others, but this does not salvage the fragmentary nature of her life, intensified by the very form of the graphic novels, and of the world she struggles through. The book, as discussed in Chapter Four, is above all a series of disruptions and failures to achieve any order for life. As a result, just as in *Hajji Baba*, virtually none of the episodes in her story comes to a resolution. The particular form of the graphic novel, which consists of a series of frames separated by gutters, amplifies this fragmentarity. The book plays itself out as a map that takes us from one point to another through the jumps and crossovers Marji makes along the way, and we barely find a chance to explore an overarching narrative of her life. Our experience of reading it, as a result, is anything but following a linear narrative.

*Reading Lolita*, on the other hand, is a less fragmented relative to the other examples, but this memoir is imbued with a sense of a thwarted life. Nafisi, against her will, undergoes compulsory movement and changes of place, uprootedness and widespread frustration with external forces that never allow any situation to resolve itself. As in *Persepolis*, here also the character has to cope with sudden disruptions and unwanted exiles. The difference from the other cases is that Nafisi believes to have found a panacea: the escape into the world of novels as a substitute for the tumult outside is strongly proposed as a unifying and salvaging tactic, and is in fact enacted in the book. This diminishes the radical sense of displacement relative to what one finds in *Hajji Baba* and *Persepolis*. Nevertheless, the response to these disruptions is living with the flow of another time created by novels. In other words, in *Reading Lolita* the time of the novels Nafisi and her students read runs in parallel to the time they live, and the reader oscillates between these
two orders throughout the book. As much as the literary time is expansive and embracing, the real time is frozen and suffocating, and the irresolvable tension between the two constitutes the non-linearity of the narrative.

Such a structural resemblance among these books across the centuries and cultures provides all the more reason for an analysis predicated on spatiality, since life in Persia/Iran, the place where, to quote Bakhtin again, ‘the knots of the narrative are tied and untied’, is the ultimate cause of this constantly interrupted life. A considerable amount of effort in each case has gone into finding a safe space, somewhere to settle. It is no surprise, therefore, that through their quests, all the characters engage with the spaces and try to find a way out of the mayhem into a safe zone. One could argue that the episodic nature of time in these narratives derives more from the characters’ spatial predicaments rather than from any deliberate contemplation of the nature of time. The linear narrative in such a spatial arrangement is hard to attain, since the creation of a linear time, in which characters develop and realize their potentialities, and advance an event or a project until they fail or succeed, requires a safe space, where they can plan or contemplate, where the basics of a safe life are provided, and survival is not the main concern all the time. None of these is to be taken for granted in any of these books. All the stories recount fragmented lives bound to be incomplete at each turn. As a result, a simplistic kind of teleology hardly makes it into the narrative, since the linearity of the story is constantly thwarted or subverted by external forces.

Two Spatial Patterns
The primary questions of this project were: what are the ways in which a spatial construction of Iran takes place in these four texts, and how do these constructions speak to each other across different time periods? As we saw in the last section, the non-linearity of the narrative in all the cases consolidates the possibility of implementing spatial theory, and having analyzed these patterns in the chosen corpus, two spatial patterns seem to have emerged. I devote this section and the next to the implications of these patterns and the ways in which they help us to understand the constructed images of Iran in this set of texts. I argue that one can find two spatial patterns implemented across the corpus.
The spatial pattern for *Reading Lolita* and *Persian Letters* is interestingly similar: in both of them, a circumscribed space for women resides at the centre of the narrative. All the important developments of these two stories take place in such a space. The one in *Persian Letters* is of course a harem in the conventional sense of the word, and the one that the narrator of *Reading Lolita* sets up in her house to gather her students also resembles a harem in several ways: all the inhabitants are women, and it is meant to be completely isolated from the events unfolding in the world outside. As discussed in Chapter Five, the reading room in *Reading Lolita* is a sort of room for intellectual women in the style of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, except that the political, progressive edge of Woolf’s proposal is taken away, and the whole enterprise is reduced to a wholehearted submission to the world of literary masterpieces. What women do in those two spaces also differs markedly from each other, but they pursue a somewhat similar aim: in both cases, the circumscribed space creates a sense of solidarity among women who see themselves treated unfairly and oppressed unjustly, and who try various ways to overcome the tyrannical system established by men. Therefore, the spatial pattern repeated in these two texts is one of a circumscribed space inhabited by discontented women.

On the other hand, in *Persepolis* and *Hajji Baba*, an entirely different spatial pattern is implemented: a vast, adventurous land with unstable boundaries and tumult everywhere, a place prone to violence and conflict. For Marji and Hajji Baba, the idea of ‘breaking out’ of the space does not exist, since there is in fact nowhere outside, even when Marji moves to Europe. While the women in *Persian Letters* and *Reading Lolita* experience a rather sedentary life, Hajji Baba and Marji are constantly on the move. The residents of the harem or study room stay put lest they get hurt by the pernicious forces outside, but Hajji Baba and Marji have to be moving all the time to escape dangers and find safe havens. The contrast between stillness and movement leads to two different spatial constructions, which distinguish these two patterns.

Taking account of the historical context of this corpus for this particular point is instructive. Of these four books, two were born out of strikingly similar contexts: *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita* both are written by Iranian women in exile within less than five years of each other. Nafisi and Satrapi are both from the Iranian upper middle class, educated in Western schools and universities, and both write in their second language. Both authors had a fairly comfortable life until 1979, which was disrupted by the revolution. Both seem to be fairly secular and progressive in thinking, although with rather different political leanings.
On the other hand, there are far fewer similarities detectable between Montesquieu and Morier. Almost a century lies between the two books, the authors are from different countries and write in different languages, but there are still points of similarity worth mentioning: both of the authors are European men, so they look at Iran from an outsider’s point of view, even though Morier spent several years in the country. It is thus striking how the connections between the books, at least in terms of the spatial construction of Iran in literary narratives, go against the contextual data. In other words, if contexts were to determine similarities to a degree, one would expect major similarities between *Perspolis* and *Reading Lolita*, as well as a vast gap that separates these two books from the others, written by foreigners long before.

The books, however, rule out this commonsensical assumption: Satrapi and Morier, the French-Iranian contemporary artist and the British nineteenth century diplomat, see Iran/Persia as a vast land of chaos and confusion, while Montesquieu and Nafisi, the eighteenth century French philosopher and the contemporary teacher of English literature, construct the space as a harem, a cloistered, circumscribed entity in stark contrast with the other pair’s attitude. In terms of literary cartography, the map each book creates connects with another one that rises out of a very different context, rather than the one provided by its contemporary text. In this sense, teasing out such similarities is a galvanization of the move beyond periodization, made possible by focusing on space rather than time: taking liberty in moving across periods and making connections among seemingly irrelevant texts adds new aspects to understanding how Iran has been represented at various points in history, and opens up new vistas for creative reading and conceptualization.

Another point to make in this regard is that, in both patterns of spatiality, all the spatial constructions, in their own ways, tend to be extreme. In other words, if the spatial construction is based on circumscribed space, the circumscription turns out to be extremely confining, even suffocating, and if it portrays a patchwork of incongruity and incomprehensibility, the chaos seems completely out control. In this, all spatial constructions also imply the possibility of implosion or explosion, since almost in all the cases the conditions are so unbearable that the current situation seems unsustainable. This introduces a strong sense of instability, and an expectation throughout the book that a breakout might occur at any given moment.
In *Reading Lolita* and *Persian Letters*, the space occupied by women is anything but comfortable. The entire harem section of *Persian Letters*, as discussed in chapter two, pivots around the women’s strong desire to break out of it. In most of the letters they write to Usbek, they constantly complain about the suffocating space he has left them in, and about the misbehaviour of eunuchs. The constant tension within this environment make it seem unstable and volatile, an expectation that becomes fulfilled in the end: as it turns out, all along the women have been planning a clandestine riot to get out of the harem.

In *Reading Lolita*, the room has a different status. It is portrayed as the place of safety, somewhere to take shelter in and be protected against the ravages of the mad society outside by reading novels. But the room in itself, the space the women occupy, is in fact not merely a safe haven, but it is also a vehicle for escape. The room provides a tool for the women to escape into the imaginary world of novels and keep away from the uncertainty of everyday life. In this sense, in *Reading Lolita*, like *Persian Letters*, the room in itself is not necessarily a place of comfort. It is being occupied in order to be left behind, it is a means to an end, which is the space of imagination, where real, genuine safety is provided. Therefore, in this book, the desire to break out of the room is also strong, even though it comes out in a different way, and the destination is not an imaginary place. This also makes the space look unstable, in the sense that it is not a place to be, but rather a passage to another world, not to mention the mayhem outside the room due to the revolution and the war, and the constant ambivalence of the narrator over staying in Iran or leaving for the West.

On the other hand, the chaos in the disorderly land of *Hajji Baba* is also extreme. Hajji Baba is not going to break out of a circumscribed space, he is in fact desperately searching for one. Wherever he pauses to take shelter and organize his life, something displaces him rather quickly, and this scenario is replicated somewhat relentlessly throughout the book in all situations. This is obviously a recipe for instability. Iran, as depicted in *Persepolis*, is also somewhat harsh and uninhabitable, and no matter how hard Marji tries to find a place of settlement, she fails every time. The revolution and the war unsettle Iran dramatically, all the conventional spatial arrangements go out the window, and she continually fails to find an oasis in this desert to call home. Even though the Iran in *Persepolis* is rather safer and more stable than the one in *Hajji Baba*, Marji is as confused and displaced as Hajji Baba and, like him, she never gains any form of stability as long as she lives in Iran.
As a result of these extreme portrayals, a strong sense of precariousness comes through all four books. In all cases, the spatial construction of Iran is one of tenuousness, since no-one is happy in the space they occupy, precisely because the portrayal of these spaces tends to be extreme, and therefore uncomfortable for characters. As a result, in one way or another, the characters try to manipulate the situation to their advantage. This sense of unfinishedness and the desire for change is part of the fluidity of the spatial construction in each case, and the sense of space one draws out of each story is likely to be imbued with a fundamental uncertainty.

A Fight for Survival
Following on from the previous point, now that we discussed two spatial patterns that connect these books beyond the confines of periodization, we can turn to the characters to see how they operate within these large patterns.

In addition to the similarities among spatial constructions, the four protagonists of these books also bear interesting resemblances. Again, the protagonists seem as far apart as can be: the women of a harem in Persia under Safavid’s rule, at the mercy of a ruthless master determined to run the place with an iron fist from afar; a rogue who starts off as a barber and sets out to do every other profession in order to earn a living; a professor of English literature at the University of Tehran whose focus lies almost entirely with American literary masterpieces; and a young, defiant woman who grows up partially in Iran and partially in Europe, and fights her way through adolescence against the restrictions imposed on her by a variety of established institutions.

All these differences notwithstanding, their lives correspond to each other in one crucial aspect: as was explored in every chapter, what they do throughout their stories is largely for the sake of survival. They have no time or space to flourish or fulfil their ambitions, the best they can do is struggle through hardships and restrictions, waiting for improvements in the future. In doing so, they devise survival tactics as explored in all of the chapters, carrying out various manoeuvres and taking all sorts of actions to navigate through an extremely harsh environment: in Persian Letters, the women stage a clandestine riot in the harem to set themselves free; in Hajji Baba, the protagonist keeps changing appearance and making up stories to save his life; in Persepolis, Marji keeps moving across territories in Iran, and later on, between two continents, to escape the
hardship on both sides; and Nafisi and her students retreat to a room and take refuge in Western masterpieces to find security and live through the ravages of war. Therefore, despite all the differences between them, they are all motivated by the same force: their survival instinct. Trapped in rather extreme and harsh circumstances, in every case the characters try to overcome hardship in order to make life, however temporarily, more bearable.

There is another point of connection between these narratives: all the survival tactics in the different situations are designed in the face of a tyrannical, ruthless force, which takes on different forms depending on the setting and timing of the story: in Persian Letters, the patriarchal qualities of the force stand out; in Hajji Baba, the society as a whole is the villain; in Reading Lolita, the force comes across as a combination of patriarchy and theocracy; and in Persepolis, it is primarily an oppressive political regime manifested in its educational system. Therefore, what we here call survival tactics has another side to it, which is perhaps even more important: while struggling to survive, all these characters mount different forms of resistance, find different ways to manipulate the tyranny and to loosen its grip. A cruel oppressiveness in each case is embodied in a villain institution or person, and the protagonist has to carry out a series of complex calculations to ease the pressure and gain some room to breathe. As a result, in every book, one reads the story of a tremendous amount of scheming and formulating of ways to deal with the system: the women in Persian Letters play a double game with Usbek by feigning faithfulness in letters and rebelling against him in reality; Hajji Baba keeps dodging the system by changing his character in a chameleonic fashion; Marji keeps moving through territories and bridging imposed gaps; and Nafisi resorts to total resignation and evades confrontation of any sort, since she considers Western literature as the ultimate form of resistance.

Another important commonality in terms of characterization among these books is the type of protagonist presented in them. Again, the differences are indeed substantial. Of course, a nineteenth century rogue in early nineteenth century has little, if anything at all, to do with an English professor of the late twentieth century. Nevertheless, these characters share a crucial quality: relative disempowerment. They are all ordinary people, largely deprived of power and influence, disconnected from the resources necessary to have a proper life under difficult circumstances. As a result, even though they all pursue change in one way or another, all of them are interested in minor changes that make life better, rather than large transformations. They are not in a position to lead a movement or wield considerable influence, so they have to engage in
what Gianni Vattimo would call ‘weak thinking’: a parasitical form of thought carried out by a weak subject who does not or cannot have an authentic project (Caputo and Vattimo), an idea which was discussed previously in different ways through Ross Chambers’ concept of ‘oppositionality’ and Michel de Certeau’s concept of ‘tactics’. In other words, one could say that these four narratives are at the same time four takes on the politics of relatively disempowered subjects, and they give valuable hints as to how micro-resistance takes place by individual subjects or small groups in the face of a far larger and stronger oppressive machine. As a result of this choice of protagonists, the scale of action also diminishes: rather than aspiring for grand social change, all of the principal characters act within their limited environments and they take account of all the options available in order to choose the best possible ones. Thus, this could as well be a study of minor resistance, a discussion about literary narratives that tell the story of the weak who never give in.

These fundamental similarities among characters also go against the rigid assumptions of periodization: it turns out that authors from very different time periods create characters as the protagonists of their stories that come from similarly powerless slices of society, and the ways in which they comprehend the notion of ‘improvement’ have plenty in common. This is also in keeping with the spatial construction of Iran in each case: the space is extremely suffocating or confusing in each case, so the chances of planning for a grand change are rather slim.

Yet however slim the chances might be, the window of improvement is never completely closed. As far as the concept of offering possible solutions through a literary narrative goes, each book in this study has one, however tacit and inextricable from the story. One can expand the survival tactics discussed above and see what they would mean if implemented on a scale as large as a nation, and how they fare in the face of insufferable hardship and oppression. In other words, while characters do their best to survive, through their activities, one receives a sense of the aspiration of each one of them for improving on the space they inhabit, to make it more friendly and bearable. Since in this study spaces are regarded as embodiments of larger situations, and the ways in which they are constructed are looked at as a means to understand how Iran is portrayed in them, one can read their minor resistances as indicative of what major resistance might look like. Again, given the context and the discussed differences between the books, at first glance the implications are not related to each other, but if studied deeper, one can find two patterns.
The chaos in *Hajji Baba* demonstrates two points of relative calm and stability: first, when Hajji Baba meets the Englishman in Istanbul, and second, when he joins the entourage of the first ambassador of Persia to England. On the first occasion, the Englishman saves his life and cures him of a dangerous disease, and he receives Hajji Baba’s diary as a token of appreciation. On the second, thanks to serving the man who would ultimately become the ambassador, he finds a safe place and a good job. A similar journey towards calmness is portrayed in *Reading Lolita*, albeit in a much more cultured and sophisticated way: Iran, as is depicted in this memoir, is in complete chaos, a situation which is exacerbated by the cruelty of its rulers. The country in itself seems unable to pull itself out of this mess, so the only way to improve on the situation is through a Western connection. While in *Hajji Baba* the connection is an actual person, in *Reading Lolita*, it emerges as works of literature, impeccable worlds of fiction into which one could retreat in order to survive. Another similarity includes the occasional comparisons between Persia and England in *Hajji Baba*, and Iran and the US in *Reading Lolita*. Interestingly, in both cases, the narrator looks up to Western culture as a model, and wishes his or her own country to be a replica of this, as is discussed in Chapters Three and Five.

On the other hand, *Persepolis* and *Persian Letters* put very different suggestions on the table. As much as *Reading Lolita* and *Hajji Baba* were distrustful of the possibility of any change made by ordinary Iranians, in *Persepolis* and *Persian Letters* there exists a fairly strong belief in the power of the weak, and the possibility of bringing about change by them. In this regard, *Persian Letters* seems to be one of the most radical documents of its time: not only does it leave this possibility open, but the book demonstrates women in the harem as its agents, who were considered the weakest element of the society. Without any help from outside, or modelling themselves on any progressive movement, they stage an uprising to topple Usbek, who embodies Oriental despotism, and they break out of the harem. *Persepolis’* way of displaying the power of the weak follows the same path. In comparison with *Reading Lolita*, the fetishization of the West as the ultimate rescuer and the wellspring of stability for Iran is completely absent from this text. Instead, trying to capture the complexity and multiplicity of forces across the land, it constructs a broad and varied map of small communities and ordinary people who could bring much-needed change and nuance to the situation.
Conclusion
Many points of resemblances have been pointed out among texts from very different historical contexts, and these resemblances are too strong to dismiss. As a result, a network of connections have emerged through this study that was, for the most part, unexpected. The move beyond periodization has enabled us to find out how literary texts across centuries can talk to each other. Moreover, when it comes to Iran, such a move shows that despite apparent differences, there exist patterns in spatial construction and characterization that recur across vast spans of time, that the literary representations of Iran do not necessarily buy into the widespread notion of a sharp distinction between Persia and Iran, between the idyllic, exotic, harmless Persia which easily embraced all sorts of fun and vices, and the strictly religious, politically dangerous, oil-ridden Iran that people tend to know these days. These texts help us to see the history of the country as a continuum, rather than a lost paradise replaced with a religious inferno, and to understand its complexities better.
Chapter Eight
Conclusion

This study was motivated by a number of questions and concerns. First, like every citizen, I was curious about how my own country, Iran, might be perceived by foreigners, especially in order to find out the characteristics and qualities that the inhabitants of a place tend inevitably to miss, but which a fresh eye can pick up. There are of course a wealth of representations available to anyone interested in such a study. Iran, however, is a particularly hard place to capture, due to its geopolitical sensitivity, its political history split between two names (Persia and Iran), and its tumultuous history. As a result, literary representations, given their capacity to accommodate ambiguities and incongruities, are apt choices for such a discussion. Georg Lukacs has shown how the rise of the novel coincides with the emergence of the ordinary person as a hero, a flawed contradictory character who, precisely because of his or her alienation from the world as a whole, can capture it better than any classical hero (Lukacs). One can extend the same logic to countries, and argue that, as inherently flawed and complicated entities as they are, modern literary works provide probably the best lens through which to look at them and understand their internal dynamics. Thus, a study of the literary representations of Iran, especially the ways in which spatial images of Iran are constructed in these works, was the main question of this project.

An overview of the literature available on this subject revealed two points. First, the dominance of periodization in literary studies, in the sense that, as Eric Hayot argues, scholars have rarely conducted research that moves easily across long spans of time. The field of the literary representations of Persia/Iran is no exception. A number of studies have addressed questions such as the literary representation of Iran in the nineteenth century, during the Enlightenment, or after the 1979 revolution. But very few, if any, have taken a non-periodised approach in order to undertake a comparative study of texts from different centuries which could reveal previously unnoticed links between seemingly isolated works, and thereby between eras. Second, the notion of the nation-state has imposed another limit to the field: most of the studies could be classified under rubrics such as representations of Iran in French literature, English literature, American literature and so forth (Peernajmodin, Lowe).

This project has sought to transcend these conventional restrictions regarding time and place, by
focusing on four books from very different historical contexts but all set in Iran, featuring an Iranian protagonist and written for a Western audience. Drawing upon literary cartography and theories of spatial construction in literary narrative, this project has pursued the question of how a literary image of Iran is constructed in each book, through interpreting each narrative as a cartographic process and studying the ways in which each book engages in constructing a spatial image of Iran. One of the aims of this project, as pointed out in the Introduction, is to offer a theoretical contribution to geocriticism, which is a very recent development in literary theory, and an area in which much remains to be explored. To begin with, a thorough study of a specific text, to the best of my knowledge, has not been conducted using this theoretical approach. Theorists such as Tally and Westphal have laid the theoretical groundwork to establish this framework as a plausible one for future studies, but they have not applied their framework to a particular literary text in any considerable way. This project is an attempt to fill this gap by extensive application of this theoretical method to four particular books, in which the link between Orientalism and geocriticism is highlighted. In terms of theory, geocriticism draws heavily upon the work of Edward Said and Fredric Jameson, and references to post colonialism or orientalism abound in it. However, what had been lacking are practical examples to clarify and materialize this link. Edward Said’s early work, Orientalism in particular, provides us with a good example for noticing this lack: Orientalism offers a comprehensive account of the development of the field. To supplement that theoretical achievement and make up for the lack of actual examples in Orientalism, he wrote Culture and Imperialism, where he engaged deeply with particular novels, such as those by Rudyard Kipling and Jane Austin, to buttress his theoretical position concerning the complicated role of the novel in consolidating the ambitions of 19th century empires. In geocriticism, while the theoretical ground is solid and the link to Orientalist theory is clear, examples of studying specific books to actualize the practical aspects of this link are not sufficient. This is the second contribution this project hopes to make to the field. More specifically, this study connects to gender politics through its engagement with feminist geography. Feminist geographers broke the dominance of male perspectives on geography, adding studies of private spaces to the field, thereby yielding a whole host of new possibilities for spatial theory. In this study, I have provided three literary examples of the study of such spaces, showing how women’s engagement with space in three literary texts leads to significant political outcomes.
Moreover, by comparing books that seem quite disparate, and in particular comparing their construction of space, this study has found unexpected resemblances across a fairly long period of time. Two broad spatial patterns were teased out of the four narratives, each pattern shared by a pair of texts. Against the spatial patterns are set the Iranian characters, who are portrayed as confined within spaces that, to a considerable extent, determine their range of movement and their behaviour in any given situation.

In summary, the findings of this project can be broken down into two categories: first, the representations of Iran as a country, a geopolitical entity. Second, the ways in which Iranian people are represented. Regarding the first category, it was pointed out in the Introduction that one of the most common images of Iran rests upon an alleged chasm between its past and its present. According to this notion, Persia was a land of exotic, harmless people who made no trouble for the civilised world. Yet, as soon as it transmogrified into the Iran of oil and political Islam, it became intractable and dangerous. By selecting works of literature from either side of this alleged chasm, this project has shown that such a notion could be refuted in at least one respect: the literary representations of this geopolitical entity do not necessarily corroborate this claim. It has become clear in this project that, despite obvious differences between the contexts within which those literary constructions came into being, there are striking resemblances, both in terms of spatial construction and characterization. This study has shown how the main driving force behind all the characters is survival, and how spatial impositions stifle every possibility of an ordinary life. Whether by its chaotic and disorderly nature or by its suffocating, limiting forces, the space constantly disrupts routine, and forces the characters to fight for their lives. Chapter Seven offers a detailed study of these resemblances.

This finding can have significant political implications: for many Iranians, like the peoples of other fallen empires, the nostalgia of the past is quite pronounced, sometimes to the extent of forestalling any engagement with the present. This sentiment has been galvanized by various political factions, ranging from exiled monarchists to zealous nationalists, who contend that the only way forward is a leap back in time in order to resuscitate this supposed lost glory. Through the works discussed here, I have argued that, at least according to widely-read literary representations of Iran across several centuries, the spatial qualities of this geopolitical entity bear remarkable resemblances to the Western eye, which means that in the eye of the literati, the
past has never been more glorious than the present, since there seems to be a fairly strong continuity across literary representations of Persia/Iran.

Second, given that the protagonists as well as a large majority of other characters in these books are Iranians, they provide a potentially rich source of ideas about the ways in which the Iranian people are represented in literary works across time. As discussed in the Introduction, from the most recent appearance of Iran in the spotlight thanks to the nuclear negotiations, all the way through the history of its media coverage and scholarship, the image of Iranians as a ‘cheating’, ‘duplicitous’ people has been fairly commonplace. Although the books studied here are selected from different eras and Iranian characters in them seem to have few commonalities, in each case various forms of duplicitous activities, in the sense of concealing one’s true intention, are evident. This study has shown that the literary representation of this behaviour often corresponds to survival attempts by the protagonists, and rather than an intentional deception of others, it demonstrates an effort to accommodate the particularly hostile environments in which the characters repeatedly find themselves.

The duplicitous character attributed to Iranians in the corpus of texts studied here appear in local literature as well: for instance, classical Persian poetry has a character called the Rend, who emerges frequently in various contexts. The Rend initially meant a derelict, but the word took on positive connotations across time, and around the late Middle Age years, it came to connote an opportunist who knows how to manoeuvre his way out of predicaments and pass unscathed through difficulties (Yarshater). The nuances of the character of the Rend, however, have often been lost on many, including Iranians themselves. On the global scene, as the recent nuclear negotiations suggest, Iranians have established a fairly entrenched reputation as an unreliable people who say one thing and do another. This stereotype is so powerful that it often unwittingly comes through conversations with Iranians about their own main characteristics as a people, as the examples in the Introduction have shown.

As this study demonstrates, literary works are suitable mediums for capturing the nuances of this sophisticated character, whose behaviour may remind one of cheating but, if put in context, is sometimes anything but that. In all the works discussed here, regardless of time and context, various forms of duplicity emerge in the behaviour of characters, but in no case is it simplified to cheating or any other flatly negative notion. Taking account of the specific context for each text,
in each narrative one sees that duplicity functions as a means of opposition in *Persian Letters*, or as survival tactics, as in *Hajji Baba*. In other words, these works suggest that two-facedness comes as a necessity when a character, and by extension a nation, is trapped in dire circumstances, when their very survival comes under threat, and honesty may well put their existence in danger. This becomes all the more salient when one notices that the protagonists here are ordinary people rather than prominent types such as Shahs and mullahs, and in some cases desperate and powerless women struggling against violent and oppressive men. In all the examples, ordinary people are at the centre, and we follow them through their struggle against the constraints of the space they inhabit. Each text demonstrates, in its own way, how the weak have their own power, and how they exert it to manipulate the powerful to their advantage.

However, it must be noted that this study makes no claim to be comprehensive. For one thing, there is a large time gap between *Hajji Baba* and *Persepolis*. The gap is left intact, since one of the intentions was to compare texts that emerge in two completely different contexts on both sides of it. It happens because the corpus of this project is defined in such a way that in all cases an ostensibly insider voice from Iran addresses a Western audience. As a result, one of the main criteria for inclusion has been the presence of an Iranian character at the centre of the texts written in the major Western languages of French and English. At the same time, however, this selection, while necessary to narrow down the corpus to a size suitable for a PhD dissertation, has restricted my range of maneuver.

This observation leads me to another project, founded on the current one, in which I will expand the range of texts discussed, and take into account other factors such as gender and genre. This future research project will have three parts. The first part will analyze a large number of Orientalist novels from the last three centuries, tracing the spatial patterns that recur through them. My hypothesis, elaborated in this study to a degree, is that there are two extreme spatial constructions that recur in those novels: under the literary eye of the West, the Middle East countries are constructed either as a very suffocating space (embodied in the harem, as in *Persian Letters*) or a very open, chaotic one (embodied in the desert, as in *Hajji Baba*). This part will discuss the extent to which these patterns recur, and show how such an articulation of space fits into the set of knowledges produced to serve the empire, and provide geographical justification for its conquests.
The second part will look at the texts that resist the mainstream Orientalist tradition from the perspective of gender. There are literary narratives produced by Westerners that carefully avoid reductionism, and in doing so provide complex but barely noticed literary cartographies. The case of *Persepolis* was discussed at length in Chapter Five. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a significant number of travelogues were written by wives of diplomats or ordinary female tourists, the women who personally had no political or commercial benefit in their portrayals of Middle East countries. Due to those circumstances, it is more likely to find nuanced, even heterodox narratives that counter the mainstream narratives, produced almost completely by men. This part will explore whether this is the case.

The third part will be dedicated to comics, another literary form capable of putting forth a nuanced spatial construction. Due to its unique combination of words and images, which makes it structurally similar to a map, comic narratives have a capacity for spatial construction that other literary genres lack. The recent upsurge of comic books about the Middle East, created usually by journalists-artists, suggests that such a quality has begun to be employed as a vehicle for producing counter-narratives to those the mainstream media spreads about the Middle East. In Chapter Five I talked about Satrapi’s *Persepolis* extensively and discussed the spatial capability of comics as a literary representation through analyzing the ways in which *Persepolis* creates an alternative map of Iran in the form of comics. This could be applied on other comic books as well, and incorporate the work of artists such as Joe Sacco, Guy Delisle, and Craig Thompson.

In conclusion, this project started when the nuclear negotiations between Iran and six world powers were unfolding, and comes to an end when the deal is struck. After this turning point, now that the historical tension between Iran and the West has begun to abate and talk of normalization is everywhere, it seems mandatory to turn the spotlight on ordinary people and look at their lives and demands, now that a period of relative stability has started.

Two arguments by two notable scholars address issues similar to those studied in this thesis in a different language. The first is an argument pursued in an article by Abbas Milani in *Atlantic* magazine. He contends that, unlike what the mainstream media too often suggests, ‘it’s the mundane activities of everyday Iranians that could determine the long-term future not just of Iran’s nuclear program, but of the country as a whole’. Milani points out another battlefield,
where he believes the real struggle is unfolding, which must be taken into account, since the main factors are not blatantly political, but rather, they consist in:

Cultural insurgency waged in the often-ignored little battles that decide everything from the mundane minutiae of everyday existence—like how much of a woman’s hair can show outside her scarf—to the question of who can publish a book or make a film (Milani, Atlantic).

Milani’s article is indicative of the recent interest in the ‘mundane’ aspects of life in Iran. The Guardian’s ‘Tehran bureau’, which started in 2013, is a fascinating example of this: for the first time, a highly-respected Western newspaper devoted a whole part of its website to extensive and detailed reports about everyday life in Iran, focusing largely on the game-changing potential of such activities. Journalistic accounts such as Ramita Navai’s City of Lies or Hooman Majd’s The Ministry of Guidance Invites You Not to Stay visit the invisible corners of Iranian society and report things hitherto almost unheard-of in the West.

A further text worthy of consideration here is Asef Bayat’s Life as Politics (2010) which provoked plenty of debates in Middle Eastern studies, because it addresses a commonplace misunderstanding that has damaged the field for a long time. Bayat describes how traditional social movement theories fail to account for the grassroots style of resistance in the Middle East, and argues that the substantial changes in that region came about through ‘nonmovements’, disorganized interventions of ordinary agents, or in his own words: ‘the collective endeavors of millions of noncollective actors, carried out in the main squares, back streets, court houses, or communities’ (Bayat ix). Bayat contends that the notion of historical stagnation has been so entrenched in the Western imagination that the vivid dynamics at the level of everyday life in the Muslim world has gone largely overlooked.

The current project is a contribution to Iranian studies from a similar perspective, this time by analysing the moments and cases where a Western literary text takes up and articulates such dynamics in the everyday life of characters from a given historical situation. Bayat, and many other scholars for that matter, barely address literary works, yet these texts are probably the best places to see how nuanced portraits of those non-movements come into being. Here, I have discussed characters’ ‘art of presence,’ their ‘story of agency in times of constraints’ (Bayat ix) through the prism of literary texts, to show how spatial constraints are constructed in four texts, and how characters struggle over their right to be present within that space. This is a research
path that, I believe, has shed fresh light on our perception of the Middle East, and as we move down it, the pictures we receive become increasingly sharp and precise. This opens the way to a new stage of scholarship about Iran, which takes seriously subjects such as material culture and the role of ordinary people in shaping what Iran has come to be.
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