SARJANA
Vol. 41, No. 1, June 2026, pp. 19-31

SELF-ORIENTALIZING REPRESENTATIONS OF IRANIAN MEN IN *ECHOES FROM THE OTHER LAND* BY AVA HOMA

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ABSTRACT

Echoes from the Other Land is a collection of short stories by Ava Homa, an Iranian-Canadian writer and social activist. The stories present a pessimistic and cynical view of Iranian men as victimizers and the country as an open-air prison. The portrayal of men as beneficiaries and perpetuators of restrictive societal norms and women as oppressed captives points to a lopsided politics of representation. The prevalence of such an accusatory and condemnatory stance toward Iranian men is thus problematic. My argument is that, as a diasporic text, Homa's work harkens back to other notable diasporic works that similarly betray self-Orientalizing tendencies in representing men by characterizing them as primitive and abusive while women as victims. After analyzing these stories from such a critical perspective, I will conclude this paper by discussing the notion of hypervisibility/invisibility as the corollary of such a politics of representation.

Keywords: masculinities; patriarchy; self-orientalism; hypervisibility; invisibility

INTRODUCTION

Echoes from the Other Land, [henceforth *Echoes*], is Ava Homa's debut work that was published in 2010. It consists of seven short stories depicting episodes in the lives of Iranian women who, on personal and societal levels, have to grapple with the challenges of living in a restrictively theocratic and patriarchal society. Almost all the stories in this collection either directly or indirectly challenge the ethos and cultural norms of a male-dominated theocratic society. While I do not intend to condone, vindicate, or downplay the oppression and injustice that women experience daily under any theocratic ruling system, I do wish to object to the lopsided and absolutist representation of male characters in *Echoes*. Despite the variation of themes and motifs, all the stories share a glaring similarity: a misandrist and negative representation of Iranian men. The perpetuation of such a negative portrayal of male characters in *Echoes* maintained in the name of criticizing theocratic patriarchy cannot be easily dismissed, as it belongs to a long-standing history of self-disparagement rooted in the history of Iranian socio-political identity shaped in modernity. If according to Abedinifard such a "self-deprecating" tendency can be traced back to Qajar era of mid-nineteenth century Iran where a nascent sense of national identity was beginning to take shape through a "self-orientalizing framework that developed . . . under the perceived European gaze; and the perceived humiliation of Iranians" (Abedinifard 2021, p.2), in recent decades, as noted by Sanaz Fotouhi, such a framework has expanded to include exilic female Iranian writers who contribute to a self-criticizing tradition of writing that dates back to Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) (Fotouhi 2015, p.178). This self-disparaging attitude solidified in the wake of the overthrow of the last Pahlavi Shah and the subsequent establishment of the theocratic ruling system, which laid the groundwork for the consolidation of a kind of militant patriarchy and the enforcement of misogynistic policies under the mantle of sharia. Thus, considering the male-informed policies, cultural practices, and ethos of such a theocratic state, it is no surprise that men are often paradigmatically associated with the ruling system, as their complicity is

taken for granted. In other words, men are vicariously held responsible and deemed censurable on behalf of a hegemonic system whose gender-biased regulatory and disciplinary power structure is premised on male chauvinism and androcentrism. This means that men are mostly deemed the *de facto* beneficiaries of the status quo.

The problem with this view is that it promotes an antithetical, if not antagonistic, male-female relationship, whereby, through polarization, women are pitted against men who purportedly benefit from patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Such a stance leads to the emergence of the dichotomy of the oppressor (i.e., men) versus the oppressed (i.e., women). By considering men as a homogenized body of victimizers and women as victims, we fail to particularize the nuances and complexities of social reality. Such an approach can result in misrepresentations and misconceptions, particularly in the context of diasporic writings to which authority is ascribed and serve as a medium or reference for the conceptualization of the non-Western other in the West. In recent decades, there have been books and movies that have helped consolidate such a view. For example, Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), like Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter*, inculcates a sense of victimhood in women by presenting men as complicit in perpetrating injustices against them. Writing through a victim mentality often gives a blinkered view of reality, leading to, in this case, misleading generalizations about Iranian men and masculinities.

Commenting on Nafisi's book, Mitra Rastegar argues that "Nafisi's representation of women as victims of state violence in Iran becomes a key component of asserting this binary, opposing a monolithic and barbaric Iranian state to the democratic ethos that she claims is implicit in the (Western) novel and appreciated by her female students" (Rastegar 2006, p.108). A misandrist representation of men is problematic not only because it fails to reflect reality, but also because it is myopic and misconstrued. Men also suffer under a patriarchal system because they are deprived of healthy and constructive relationships and forced to comply with demands or live up to expectations that are not necessarily conducive to their mental, emotional, and intellectual growth. In recent decades, the trailblazing works of Michael S. Kimmel and Raewyn Connell have directed attention to the necessity of reconsidering masculinities not as unitary and monolithic, but as contingent, precarious, and internally divided categories.[2]

SELF-ORIENTALISM AND DIASPORIC WRITINGS

One reason that can ensure the success of diasporic writings in the West is the extent to which such works align with the expectations of Western readers. In other words, writers' tacit compliance with readers' demands has predisposed them to craft works that feature specific topics and address issues more appealing to their Western audience. In a way, the guaranteed success of such works often leads writers to create pieces that are not necessarily truthful representations of reality but enjoy certain degrees of truthlikeness, lending them legitimacy and credibility. Edward Said explains a similar situation in *Orientalism* that points to the existence of a "dialectic of reinforcement" between the reader and the writer. Said discusses the formation of "textual attitude" through which readers prefer to evade an actual encounter with reality by satisfying themselves with the text supposedly describing that reality. He argues that textual attitude arises from an interactive relationship between the reader and the writer, whereby "a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement" is activated "by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers' experiences" (Said 1979, p.94). The genealogy of writings by Iranian diasporic female authors corroborates the existence of such a dialectic involving the representation of Iranian masculinities in a self-Orientalizing manner. As noted by Fotouhi, self-Orientalizing tendencies in the depiction of Iranian masculinities are premised on generalizations that reduce them to limited categories and descriptions:

> In these books hardly ever do we come across likeable and rounded male characters or even a loving male/female relationship. More often than not when men are present they are representative of a specific type of masculinity: patriarchs, abusive, sexually deviant or religiously fundamental. (2015, p.186)

This lopsided and distorted depiction of men and masculine figures often found in the writings of exilic female writers does not only fail to render a true picture of Iranian society but also serves a secondary purpose. Such (mis)representations, which generally appear in memoirs and other genres, reproduce the same "reductive but familiar narratives that pit the constructed 'Third-world woman' against her male counterpart while setting the stage for what is presumed to be her salvation" (Akhavan et al. 2007). Needless to say, biased renditions of both sexes have frequently abounded in the discourses of colonialism. However, the adoption of an accusatory, even deprecatory stance toward Iranian men in the writings of Iranian diasporic female writers is noteworthy, as such texts seem to align with an orientalist discursive tradition. Dabashi characterizes writers who willfully and knowingly demonize "their own culture and society" as native informers (2011, p.17). Dabashi differentiates between a native informer and a native informant; the latter "credits comprador intellectuals with the knowledge they claim to possess but in fact do not," while the former "suggests the moral degeneration specific to the act of betrayal" (2011, p.12). He cites Azar Nafisi as an example of a native informer who is engaged in "promoting the cause of US imperialism" through her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) (Dabashi 2011, p.22). Dabashi's scathing criticism of the book encompasses various aspects, ranging from its tantalizing cover to its denigration of Iranian culture and society. The book was published at a critical time when US imperialistic rhetoric of war-mongering, disguised as the 'war on terror,' was rampant following the 2001 attacks on American soil. The point is not that Homa's *Echoes* is comparable to Nafisi's or Mahmoody's books in its depth and breadth of misrepresentation and influence, though it undeniably harkens back to them and many similar fictional or nonfictional texts. Nonetheless, *Echoes* can be placed within the same tradition, which betrays a very limited and reductive conception of Iranian culture and, in this specific case, Iranian masculinities.

Echoes, as its title suggests, is supposed to be a reflection of the other land, that is, Iran. Yet, when viewed in its entirety, *Echoes* poses some problems in reflecting the reality it claims to represent: Is it coincidental that almost all stories are concerned with similar themes presenting such an unredeeming image of Iranian men? Why should such a scope of negativity be packed within the hundred pages of a collection that claims to be 'echoes,' or reflections, from 'the other' land? Why do male characters appear as villains and women as passive victims in almost all stories? These are the questions that prompted me to launch a critical analysis of this collection of stories. I have already implied that *Echoes* can be studied in light of a tradition of self-orientalism; however, to demonstrate this point in a more concrete and tangible way I aim to conduct a close reading of stories hoping to give a sense of their atmosphere and tone and the way they resonate with the ethos of the self-orientalizing perspective. My approach will be organized by the cluster of themes and motifs that stories share with each other.

DISCUSSION

Betrayal, Unreliability and Ambivalence of Iranian Men

The theme of betrayal resonates strongly throughout this collection. Also, the representation of Iranian men as shifty and unreliable recurs in *Echoes*. To show the bigotry and narrow-mindedness of men as husbands, ex-husbands, fathers, or would-be husbands,

Homa provides a wide range of scenarios to illustrate how female characters suffer at the hands of Iranian men.

The opening story, "Fountain", specifically addresses the ambivalence of love and hate and the sense of betrayal and despair the female protagonist feels after marrying the man of her dreams. "Fountain" tells the story of Anis, a girl from Qeshm Island, who, having defied the tradition of arranged marriage, marries Ali, a young man from Tehran. Anis plans to leave the country to pursue her Ph.D. studies on a scholarship. However, this decision has strained their relationship because Ali has no intention of leaving Iran. Ali's disagreement stems from his concern for his family, particularly his father, who seems to need medical care and treatment. Although not specifically mentioned, apparently, Anis is pregnant and contemplates an abortion because, at the beginning of the story, she holds a small pink pill that "had stained her palm" (Homa 2010, p.1). During a conversation, Ali learns from his friend Esi that he can legally stop her from traveling abroad because "No woman can go abroad without her husband's permission" (Homa 2010, p.8). According to Esi, "in the Islamic Republic of Iran, a wife is like a personal tool, like a toothbrush. . . Seriously! Legally speaking, women have no right to step out of the house without their husband's permission, let alone go abroad" (Homa 2010, p.8). The image of Iranian women as prisoners is clearly presented here. Additionally, Iranian men are depicted as jailers who can willfully curb the freedom of Iranian women. "Fountain" illustrates the female character's aspirations for self-development and liberty while her husband can peremptorily block her path, as he literally does upon returning home. The desire for flight and freedom emerges from this sense of confinement, which is a recurrent motif in *Echoes*.

In the final part of the story, Ali, emboldened by Esi's words and hoping to assert his authority, bars Anis from leaving the apartment. This is a grotesque attempt to exercise his authority because his wife has a legitimate reason to go out: she is going to deliver a work project and pick up her check. Nevertheless, Ali blocks her path and orders her to wipe the heavy makeup from her face. Ali makes a fool of himself, not knowing the difference between sunscreen and makeup. Embittered by his own ignorance, Ali taunts Anis about her fear of getting her dark skin darker: "Heh . . . you're scared your skin would get darker than this? Scared of losing your exemplary beauty, princess? Hah?" (Homa 2010, p.12). Unfazed by Ali's irrationally high-handed behavior, she insists on leaving the house, only to be pushed against the wall. Ali, now more aggressive than before, is suddenly overcome with sympathy for Anis as he sees tears in her eyes. Feeling ashamed and attempting to embrace her, he is rejected by Anis as she "peeled herself from his arms, opened the door, and left" (Homa 2010, p.13). The story has an unclear ending, as "Ali rushed to the balcony. He saw Anis open the door of the building and run. She ran as fast as she could. . . . When Ali raised his eyes again, he was not able to see Anis any more" (Homa 2010, p.14). The image of Iranian man presented here is one of anxiety and ambivalence. Anxious to exercise his authority, yet internally conflicted, Ali is himself a victim of patriarchal norms. [3]

The second story, "Wind Through My Hair", is in many ways, comparable to "Fountain" as it concerns a woman's desire for freedom. Similar to the first story, Azar, the female protagonist, needs to overcome male adversaries to assert her autonomy and freedom. As the title of the story indicates, the hair serves as a metaphor for freedom embodied in the act of its unveiling or uncovering. Thus, the title of the story through its visual imagery signifies the joy of unshackling the chains of restriction and fanaticism. Besides this idea, the story also features deceitful and unreliable male characters.

Azar is a hotel receptionist, branded a "man magnet" by her boss (Homa 2010, p.16), because her glib tongue and alluring looks allow her to attract visitors to the Hilton Hotel. Azar is consumed by the desire to leave the "Pigsty," that is, Iran. To achieve this goal, she must deal with a bunch of disgusting men whom she has nicknamed Liar, a near homophone of 'lawyer,' and "the Charlatan car purchaser" (Homa 2010, p.15), as well as "the Jerk," her former husband

(Homa 2010, 22). There is also Reza, her friend and confidante. Reza is studying for his PhD comprehension exam. He and Azar met at the University of Tehran some years ago and became close friends about a year ago. Azar is a non-Tehrani girl who, having finished her degree, went back to her hometown, only to find life there intolerable because "the mentality of the town pushes" a single girl to marry before rumors start to spread (Homa 2010, p.22). In the end, she had no choice but to marry the Jerk, who had promised to take her abroad to continue her education; however, to her dismay, she was even barred from going "to work because there were 'too many men' in [her] department" (Homa 2010, p.25). In other words, the Jerk's jealousy deprived Azar not only of a regular job but also of the freedom of movement. Compared to the other men she has come to know, Reza is a real gentleman, despite their differences of opinion. A serious issue that torments Azar is her inability to reconcile her attachment to him with his religiosity. This contradiction leads to arguments between them.

Azar is sharply critical of the current sociopolitical conditions in Iran. During a telephone conversation with Reza, after noticing that people on the street are "setting up a tent for mourners" for the annual ceremony of Ashura, she rants about the "masochistic carnival" (Homa 2010, 19), accusing Reza of being brainwashed and unable to see the reality of present-day Iran, which is a far cry from her glorious ancient past that boasted Cyrus the Great. According to her, living in Iran now is tantamount to "living in the Dark Ages" (Homa 2010, p.19) and an "Islamic Dungeon" (Homa 2010, p.21). The bone of contention between them concerns the question of religiosity and patriotism: for Azar "being religious means accepting the regime," while for Reza, "Loving Iran and supporting the regime are two different things" (Homa 2010, p.21).

In the end, Reza proves to be as shallow-minded as her father and her former 'Vampire' husband. Reza, though a good-natured person with a "strong personality and morality" (Homa 2010, pp.28-29) as admitted by Azar, is superciliously self-righteous regarding his decision to marry Azar. He considers his decision to marry Azar, a non-virgin girl, a selfless act and therefore a huge favor to her. He implies this through a telephone conversation:

> I've been thinking about this for years. I'd never say this . . . but my older brother's wife was a similar case, and since then, about ten years ago, I've always been asking myself if I'd be able to do the same thing. I've realized now that I could. (Homa 2010, p.32)

Hearing these words from a man whom Azar has found mature and dependable is very shocking and disillusioning. Though not as sly and opportunistic as other men, Reza is bound by patriarchal conceptions of femininity. To him, virginity is a prerequisite for a marital relationship. Therefore, despite his progressive views about religion and patriotism, he suffers from a parochial idea of femininity. The hope invested in Reza as a man different from others is thus dashed. He proves to be another wolf in sheep's clothing. Disillusioned and angry at his audacity, Azar asks, "You think you're a saint, a superman, and I'm a criminal?" (Homa 2010, p.32). What the story suggests at the end is that men are all tarred with the same brush of unreliability, leaving the female protagonist no choice but to leave this wasteland of a country where there is no hope for change or improvement. Similar to Ali in "Fountain" Reza has to reconcile his conception of womanhood with his inner feelings, which is why both Ali and Reza appear unreliable, ambivalent, and even duplicitous.

These characteristics can also be found in the male characters of the other story titled "Silk Shawl". The fake prince charming of the story is Amir, a moderately religious man married to Noushin. They are attending Aria's clandestine mixed birthday party in Tehran. Before marriage, Amir was known for his modesty and shyness. However, the reader learns through Noushin's interior monologue and flashbacks that behind Amir's façade of respectability lurk wickedness and unfaithfulness. Through flashbacks, Homa provides the

backstory of Noushin and Amir, who come from two different family backgrounds. Noushin's family was not religious, making Amir "a person who seemed to be [her] opposite in every aspect" (Homa 2010, p.81). However, she insisted on marrying Amir because, as she said, she "would prefer a husband who spent his time praying rather than dancing at parties" (Homa 2010, p.81). Her former suitor was Aria, whose birthday party they are now attending. She chose Amir over Aria because she found him more reliable and deeper than the shallow and frivolous Aria. However, like in previous stories, it is only a matter of time before Iranian men show their true colors. Amir's disingenuity was discovered during Ferri's trip to Iran. Ferri, or Fakhri, is Noushin's aunt who left for America many years ago and returned for a visit. During her visit to their home, Noushin first noticed Amir's furtive glances at her aunt's open collar, where her cleavage was showing. To her shame, Ferri, Noushin's aunt, was openly flirtatious toward Amir as she browsed through their wedding photo album. Toward the end of the story, we learn that Amir and Ferri ended up sleeping together while Noushin was attending to her sick friend away from home. Noushin's cold and dismissive attitude toward her husband during the party is rooted in her knowledge of Amir's betrayal. She is wearing the same red dress that her aunt has deliberately left behind, perhaps as a keepsake for Amir. Her flirtatious behavior at the party, her skimpy gown, and her feigned interest in drinks and cigarettes are her ruses to take revenge on her unfaithful husband. In a way, Noushin's defiant attitude is a kind of self-immolation that was meant to arouse Amir's jealousy at the party. It was a provocative gesture that began with abandoning hijab after suspecting Amir's infidelity. In other words, Noushin's outrageous conduct only makes sense as a reaction to Amir's infidelity, meaning that if it were not for Amir's hypocrisy and unfaithfulness, she would not have behaved in such a tantalizing manner.

Amir is not the only lustful man in the story. During the party, Noushin's behavior and scanty dress draw the attention of other men, one of whom even makes advances toward her. As a result, she is never safe from the lascivious gazes of men attending the party, who are either inanely frivolous or brazenly lewd. Men and their behaviors are not the only focal point of "Silk Shawl". Similar to previous stories, the narrative is peppered with hints about the stifling and repressive atmosphere of the country and references to draconian laws for every minor offense. However, as far as the male characters of this story are concerned, they are generally shown in a bad light marked by promiscuity and levity. Here is what Noushin has to say about the ridiculous male characters she meets at the party:

> Once I got to the bedroom door, I leaned against the wall, held a cigarette between my fingers and asked for a light, when the boys came out of the room laughing loudly. Both offered their lighters. I was scared by the way the taller one looked at me, so I took the fat one's. "I am Hamid," he said, "very pleased to meet you."
> "His name is Pumpkin," the tall one said.
> "And this is the Tower," said the fat one, receiving a swat.
> Damn them both. They were eating me with their eyes.
> "Nice to meet you, Pumpkin and Tower." I scratched the back of my ear with my cigarette hand. The two girls stepped out of the bedroom. Pumpkin followed them with his gaze. I left once I saw Amir coming rapidly towards me, frowning, head tilted, hand covering mouth. (Homa 2010, p.75)

The titular 'silk shawl' is a subtle reminder of women's need for protecting their bodies from the ravaging gaze of men or as Noushin puts it, men's "dirty eyes":

> I realized that my shawl had thoroughly slid down. I put it back on my shoulders and left my seat. As I passed him, I glanced up, wishing to spit into his dirty eyes. I could pluck all the men's eyes, especially Amir's as he stared at Ferri in her turned down collar shirt. (Homa 2010, p.85)

Earlier I mentioned that diasporic texts by Iranian female writers tend to cast women as victims divesting them of any sense of agency. "Silk Shawl" is a perfect example in this regard. The story implies that men's vileness and wantonness are the root causes of women's misfortunes and their aberration. The implication is that men as active agents stimulate responses from passive women. Being reduced thus to an object of male manipulation, women are characterized as incapable of proactive decisions. Every action performed by a woman is in fact a response to an earlier provocation from a man. The theme of marital infidelity which is the backbone of "Silk Shawl" clearly substantiates this proactive-reactive pattern of behavior. For instance, Ferri's promiscuity can be attributed to her husband's extramarital relationships. Thus, the blame for Ferri's aberration can be pinned on her ex-husband's dissolute behavior.

While "Silk Shawl" is centered on infidelity and broken marriage vows, "A River of Milk and Honey," the third story in *Echoes*, is about self-pity and the deluded romantic idealization of men. "A River of Milk and Honey" tells the story of Sharmin, a Kurdish girl from Sanandaj, who suffers from a congenital facial deformity. She has a cousin named Azad, who is a potential suitor for Sharmin, or at least this is what she wishes to be the case. Sharmin needs to undergo surgery for her facial deformity, but her family lacks financial resources. Moreover, her facial defects have damaged her self-esteem and turned her into a diffident and timid girl. Sharmin has a neighbor named Kazhal, who is an attractive and charming girl. She is the favorite of the boys and men in the neighborhood, who ogle her whenever she is out walking. Sharmin idolizes Kazhal as a houri, a virgin nymph, who is blessed with a river of milk and honey in her paradisical bliss. She also idealizes her cousin, who, like Reza in "Wind Through My Hair," seems to be a reasonably reliable young man. For Sharmin, Azad is the person with whom she can share her nightmares in which she sees "men with thick glasses and green attires cutting [her] chin" (Homa 2010, p.38).

The fact is that Sharmin is deluded about her cousin because he is only visiting her to learn more about the beautiful girl next door. Like young men in the neighborhood, he fantasizes about Kazhal. He feels no shame in acknowledging his voyeuristic curiosity about Kazhal in Sharmin's presence:

> 'I know you have a gorgeous neighbour', he says before I get to say anything else, and he smiles mischievously. 'Do you know which is her bedroom? Do you think she sleeps by herself?' He turns his gaze away from the neighbour's house and looks into my shocked expression. 'Shaho, our other cousin, is in love with her, too. Her beauty is fascinating,' he adds, to explain himself. I tell myself how glad I am that he still feels close enough to me to share his secrets. He knows that I will keep them to myself. But my throat has constricted. No one else is Vengeance like I am. 'Her name is Kazhal,' he says, and walks towards the edge of the roof, bending over it to peer across at the house on our right. 'Rhythmical step, appealing makeup, large breasts, flat belly, big lips, God, she's incredible, just incredible,' he says as if reciting a poem. (Homa 2010, p.39)

Voyeurism is not limited to him or the young men in the neighborhood. Sharmin's father to her mother's chagrin still keeps stacks of magazines displaying skimpily-dressed woman on their covers. Sharmin's mom is angry with her dad for keeping them:

> What if *Komiteh*[4] show up at the door without notice and find the pictures of these accursed women? Are you looking for trouble?' she asked him and burnt them all. But I still remember those women. Mom said, besides, no one is that perfect and those are only pictures (Homa 2010, p.41).

Her mom is also upset about Dad's irresponsibility who never "cares for his family" (Homa 2010, p.38). Sharmin's sense of misery is not only limited to her facial deformity but also aggravated by a sense of entrapment resulting from her family circumstances: "Downstairs is too depressing. Dad is either absent or fighting with Mom over money, work, me, opium" (Homa 2010, p.45). No wonder the rooftop becomes her haven where she can watch the neighborhood and talk with Kazhal without risking being seen by others.

"The River of Milk and Honey" resonates with motifs found in previous stories including the crudeness, indifference and unreliability, to name a few, of Iranian men. These men are pathetically self-absorbed and self-serving. It is interesting to note that Homa makes sure that every woman has her share of misery from a man. In other words, for every female character, there is one vile and lustful man so that no woman is left unscathed. "The River of Milk and Honey" is no exception in this regard. As for Kazhal, her husband turns out to be a scoundrel. Even her mesmerizing beauty and charm cannot guarantee her happiness. After Kazhal's wedding, "her father found out that her husband did not own the store he claimed to own, nor did he have any of the things that he had said belonged to him. Her husband's car was actually his brother's" (Homa 2010, p.47). Kazhal's family has fallen victim to the chicanery of a fake prince charming.

The stories, so far, have illustrated that misery is the common denominator of Iranian women and the leveler among them. All the four stories discussed in this section aim to inculcate the idea that men are the scourge of women's lives. In the following section, other unpleasant aspects of Iranian men and masculinities will be addressed in two more stories of *Echoes*.

The Perversion and Barbarity of Iranian Men

The two stories that will be discussed in this section are "Glass Slippers" and "I Am One of Them". Despite their differences in terms of theme and writing style, they share important themes: the perversion and barbarity of Iranian men. "Glass Slippers" is set in Qom, one of the most religiously conservative cities in Iran. The story, narrated in the second-person point of view, opens with two sisters, Sara and her younger sister, Sahar, secretly watching an alley from a storeroom cluttered with junk, spying on Sahar's husband, Yusuf, whom the sisters suspect of infidelity. Sara is helping her sister catch Yusuf red-handed. Sahar's suspicions were aroused after she found a lipstick and bra hidden in Yusuf's closet. During their watch, Sahar reminisces about Yusuf's personality and their married life. The reader learns that Yusuf is a gentle and good-natured person, as he has never 'yelled' at her or 'bullied' her. He is also poetic and kindhearted, as "[h]e knows poetry by heart, cares for sparrows, feels pity for the fish imprisoned in the small pond of the yard, and loves flowers" (Homa 2010, p.65). All these qualities make him a lovable person, and indeed Sahar loves him despite the fact that their marriage was a traditionally arranged one. However, as seen before, when it comes to men, appearances can be misleading. Moreover, while the stories discussed so far have emphatically sought to illustrate the bigotry, chauvinism, and immorality of Iranian men, "Glass Slippers" is meant to illuminate the queerness of Iranian masculinity. Unlike the previous stories in which men were portrayed as complicit in the patriarchal system and benefiting from "the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (Connell 2005, p.79), in "Glass Slippers," the male character does not embody hegemonic masculinity but is a victim of it.[5]

Tired of waiting, Sara and her sister suspect that someone might have entered the house before they started their watch. So, they decide to enter the house to assess the situation. As they enter, they hear loud music coming from the living room. Sahar, trembling with anxiety, opens the door, and lo and behold, she sees

> a woman in the room in [her] blue dress and glass slippers. She has long blue hair and is dancing in front of the large mirror in the living room. The woman turns to [Sahar]; her heavy, repulsive makeup makes her look like a hooker even though her face is under some tulle. She seems familiar, but [Sahar] fail[s] to recognize her, [she] cannot see clearly. Sara steps forward, mouth open. (Homa 2010, p.68)

The grotesque image of a man wearing a woman's dress with a heavy makeup dancing in glass slippers to music is so incongruous with her expectations that it takes a while for Sahar's brain to register what is happening before her eyes. The dancing woman is in fact Yusuf resembling a drag queen with makeup and a wig. The bra and lipstick stowed in the closet belonged to him hoping to hide his sexual orientation. The story ends abruptly upon on this shocking revelation without providing any clues or hints about Yusuf's motives. It must be noted that the presentation of such a degrading picture of an Iranian man corresponds to the familiar image of effeminacy, and degeneracy found in orientalist discourses about the Orient. "Glass Slippers" is therefore unique in its offering of glimpses of homoerotism in an Iranian context.

The next story, "I Am One of Them", is slightly different from the previous one in terms of the oppression and victimization of the female character. "I Am One of Them" is about Sana, a girl from Qeshm Island, who, as the story opens, has locked herself in her room because she has been deeply disturbed and disappointed by the way Zanyar, her suitor, reacted to the news she shared with him. Refusing to answer Zanyar's phone calls, Sana is talking with Susan, their mutual friend, on the phone while her mom is banging persistently on the door, imploring her to open it. Amidst the noise and clamor, the reader gradually realizes what this fuss is all about. Sana is "cut like the women of African tribes" (Homa 2010, p.53), meaning that she has been subject to female genital mutilation (FGM), an issue that she has hinted at to Zanyar, but to her dismay, he laughed in disbelief. His inconsiderate and incongruous reaction has deeply hurt Sana because, unbeknownst to him, Sana was one of those whom Zanyar had called freaks (Homa 2010, pp.53-54). As a result, she has decided to break off her engagement with him. As Sana explains to Susan, Zanyar had no idea that she had undergone FGM and had blurted that according to a documentary, "men whose wives are like that have a higher tendency to marry a second wife or get secret lovers" (Homa 2010, p.57). While there is no denying that FGM is still practiced in some regions in Iran[6], it is noteworthy that Homa uses this not widely practiced barbaric tradition as a peg to hang the barbarity, callousness, and tactlessness of Iranian men. Similar to previous stories, the female character is portrayed as the victim of misogyny and bigotry.

While Zanyar cannot be directly held responsible for the physical harm and psychological trauma Sana has suffered, the story has been crafted in a way that places the entire blame for the barbaric tradition of FGM on him. His unintended tactlessness was merely a result of his ignorance; yet the full weight of blame and culpability must come crashing down on him. In other words, he must vicariously pay for what the tradition has imposed on Sana. By keeping him absent from the story and denying him the opportunity to defend himself, Homa intensifies Sana's sense of victimhood, reducing her to a hysterical person whose only escape route is to contemplate suicide. The last paragraph of the story is highly suggestive of this intention:

> Sana's cell beeps and the line goes dead with a click. She throws it back onto the floor. Sana lies on the bed, the glossy papers crinkling under her, the woman knocking, a man's voice calling her name at the door. The music ends

> and everything turns silent for a moment, her finger touching the tip of the knife, her dark, stern eyes looking right and left. (Homa 2010, p.59)

As mentioned above, Homa presents her female characters as victims of patriarchy and gender-biased norms in a way that leaves them with no agency. I wonder to what extent adherence to this victim mentality can be productive in rendering a credible and creditable picture of Iranian men and women. There is no denying that women have suffered under theocratic patriarchy, but dwelling too much on the suffering and ignoring the resistance and subversive tactics adopted by women can be very problematic, as it aligns with an otherizing perspective:

> The reconfiguration of the Other as a new binary between antimodern and promodern Iranians occurs along two overlapping parameters: gender and religion/secularism. Women are constructed as overwhelmingly the victims of state violence and oppression, and thereby as inherently more open to the ideals of democracy and freedom. Religious men are constructed as supporters and beneficiaries of these policies, and secular men as passive witnesses who are only secondarily affected through women. (Rastegar 2006, pp.116-117)

Homa's tendency to focus on the hindrances and obstacles women are facing to attain self-development, and self-fulfillment is not entirely unwarranted. However, the problem with this obsession is that men are portrayed as accessories and accomplices to restrictive norms and traditions. Such focus can ultimately be self-defeating because it leaves no agency for women, reducing them to the passivity of the oppressed and men to oppressors. It is understandable why Homa is concerned with the oppression of women and the restrictions imposed on them. Women have always strived to gain control over their bodies, voices, and movements, especially in the past two centuries in Iran. Writing has been an instrumental tool for negotiating their way toward freedom and self-expression, as noted by Farzaneh Milani[7]. However, writers overly concerned with depicting the victimization of women fail to understand that "[t]hey are also the most vibrant forces of change. And women writers have been and continue to be at the forefront of this conflict" (2011, p. xxiv).

As mentioned in the introductory sections, *Echoes* shares self-Orientalizing thematic undertones with other works of diasporic writing in its representation of Iranian masculinities. One more area of overlap, to use Farzaneh Milani's words, is "[m]etaphors of containment—walls, veils, imposed silences, fences, cages, blind windows, closed doors, and bars" (2011, p. xxiv). These metaphors are present in Echoes from the first story all the way to the last one discussed above. Yet, as Milani emphasizes, the prevalence of such metaphors in women's writing has been offset by "the desire to sprout wings, fly, flee, run, dance, sing through their texts, bear witness to the hitherto unspoken, and push boundaries into the unsaid and the forbidden" (2011, p. xxiv). If, according to Milani, Iranian women writers could be deemed "the most vibrant forces of change," Homa's text is severely deficient in this regard. She is exclusively focused on the oppression of women at the expense of their agency and initiative. The text thus becomes a tale of women's woes so overwhelmingly pessimistic that no hope for change is conceivable. The picture Homa presents of Iranian women does them no justice but aligns with a passivity and powerlessness that can be traced back to Orientalist or colonial discourses, where Oriental women are rendered invisible, voiceless, objectified, and sometimes bludgeoned into submission.

CONCLUSION

Hypervisibility and Invisibility of Iranian Masculinities

Echoes offers a limited perspective on Iranian men who are assigned stereotypical roles in the economy of male-female relationships. Such a restricted viewpoint results from a tendency toward generalization which is the legacy of colonialism and Orientalism. As Said reminds us the discourse of Orientalism tends to conceptualize non-Westerns as a collective and homogenous body of people which is easier to handle than through a particularized perspective. Iranian diasporic female writers are prone to committing the same error by tending to portray Iranian men in a generalized way at the expense of a more multifaceted and particularized view. Such an approach results in the contradictory conditions of hypervisibility and invisibility of Iranian masculinities.[8]

In the context of Iranian masculinities, the paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility relates to inconsistencies in the representation of men. According to Fotouhi, by emphasizing certain aspects of Iranian masculinities as the defining characteristics of all Iranian men, Iranian female diasporic writers create a hypervisibility-invisibility axis whereby the representation of Iranian men "in general terms" renders "Iranian men, and alternative aspects of Iranian masculinity, invisible" (2015, p.190). This idea is similar to what Shahin Gerami argues regarding the necessity of distinguishing between Islamic identity and Muslim identities. For him, the former is "an abstract construct applied by others, "while the latter consists of "concrete... identities created through individual or group agency" (Gerami 2005, p.448). Gerami believes that "[t]he pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity overshadows national and cultural masculinities in most Muslim societies" (2005, p.450). Drawing on Kelly Oliver, Fotouhi argues that hypervisibility and invisibility result in bad visibility because "neither allow for those represented to be seen or recognized as individuals" (2015, p.190). As far as Iranian masculinities in diasporic writings are concerned, this means

> [b]y representing Iranian men, in general terms, and without giving them the opportunity to express themselves, these writers are replicating the kind of oppressive force that many are writing to escape. In doing so, they are rendering Iranian men, and alternative aspects of Iranian masculinity, invisible. (2015, p.190)

At any rate, hypervisibility inevitably results in a kind of invisibility that amounts to misrepresentation. The other aspect of hypervisibility is the objectification or fetishization that follows from it. There is also another important point regarding the representation of men, or, in general, masculinities in the Middle East, which involves othering men and women by construing men as the problem and women as the victims. In this sense, as Paul Amar elaborates, hypervisible subjects mean

> fetishized figures that preoccupy public discourse and representations but are not actually recognizable or legible as social formations and cannot speak on their own terms as autonomous subjects rather than as problems to solve. . . Moralized, criminalized, racialized, colonized masculinities in the Middle East are some of the most popular subjects of modern geopolitical hypervisibility, twinned with their fetishized Others or victims—the supposedly suppressed traditionalized veiled woman. (2011, p.40)

The above quotation perfectly illustrates the male-female relationship portrayed in Echoes, wherein men are either the problem or the root cause of it. They are also denied an opportunity to voice their opinions, and if they are granted one, it only serves to further incriminate them. Iranian diasporic female writers such as Homa are likely to fall into the pitfalls of essentialist politics of representation, as the examples of Betty Mahmoudi and Azar Nafisi demonstrate. Homa's problem in her debut work is that she tends to represent men in exclusionary terms, failing to allow for a more inclusive and redeeming portrayal of masculinities in her work.

To sum up, I find the sheer negativity associated with male characters through their fanaticism, bigotry, and duplicity in Homa's debut work deeply objectionable because it reflects the cynical view that men are both perpetrators and beneficiaries of the system. I do not mean to absolve all men of their complicity in perpetuating oppression against women or to whitewash the unfavorable conditions that hinder both men and women from living a normal life in Iran. However, when viewed in its entirety, the collection resonates with the idea that men are directly or indirectly accountable for whatever plagues and blights women's lives. By focusing too much on the plight of Iranian women suffering at the hands of Iranian men, Homa denies women agency and proactive involvement in their lives, reducing them to passive victims whose only course of action is to take flight or suffer silently. The prevalence of such politics of representation compels me to propose that this collection of stories exemplifies self-Orientalizing conceptions, which I hope to have effectively addressed above.

ENDNOTES

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[2] Both of these scholars are credited with the development of masculinity studies. I have briefly explained about their contributions to this field in later sections.

[3] Though neither Esi nor Ali is happy with the sociopolitical conditions in Iran, they can still benefit from the patriarchy. Such an ambivalent view aligns them with a kind of masculinity which Connel describes as complicitous. According to Connel, "[m]asculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense" (p.79). Despite their dissatisfaction with their country, they still can avail themselves of the "the patriarchal dividend" to ensure their dominance over women through legal tools that have been provided by the very system they find fault with. This makes them not only complicitous but also ambivalent. This ambivalence is clearly reflected in Ali's treatment of his wife at the end of the story.

[4] A kind of morality police or vice squad in operation during the early years of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

[5] Connell in *Masculinities* divides masculinities into four categories of hegemonic, subordinated, marginalized and complicitous. Subordinated masculinities are represented by gay men, marginalized by black men and complicitous are those men who "without the tensions or risks of being the front line troops of patriarchy" quietly benefit from hegemonic masculinity and the subordination of women (p.79).

[6] A study conducted by Kameel Ahmady indicates that FGM in Iran is mostly practiced in four provinces including Hormozgan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan. Though it is a ritual basically observed among Sunnis, there have been reports of its practice by Shiites in these regions, too.

[7] In *Veils and Words* (1992), Milani argues that "Writing, with its potential for public communication, for entering into the world of others, could be considered no less a transgression than unveiling. In both, a woman expresses/exposes herself publicly" (p.6). She then posits that "Significantly, the movement to unveil in Iran is associated with women's attempt to break into print as writers. Pioneering women writers unveiled both their bodies and their voices" (p.7). In 2011, she published *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, which was a revision of *Veils and Words*, and

was meant to go "beyond the perennial veiling/unveiling debate" by addressing "the issue of freedom of movement" (p. xxii). In this book, Milani argues that women writers' attempt at "Breaking the spell of their textual quasi-invisibility" coincided with their "breaking into the public sphere" whereby "they have made the circulation of their bodies and their voices central to their artistic universe" (p. xxiv).

[8] Hypervisibility and invisibility are not mutually exclusive. What makes an entity invisible has not necessarily anything to do with its lack of visibility. Paradoxically, when something becomes hypervisible it is likely to become invisible or ignored. Therefore, both hypervisibility and invisibility can produce similar results. For example, in the case of masculinity, it is its ubiquity and prevalence that make masculinity invisible. The concept of invisible masculinity has been thoroughly investigated by Michael S. Kimmel. A helpful source in this regard is Kimmel's "Invisible Masculinity", where he argues that "The very process that confer privilege to one group and not to another groups are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred" (p. 30).

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