

Signs of Resistance: Developing Iranian Women's Memoirs

Señales de resistencia: desarrollando la memoria de mujeres iraníes

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ABSTRACT

This article takes into account that during the last decade, more than ever, Iranian women memoirists developed writing their life stories to convey their message to a wider public. In a society where 'keep face', 'protect appearance' and many more cultural proverbs are preventive forces on the way of modest female memoirists, it is crucial to examine what has assisted them to successfully assert themselves and unveil their voice. In this regard, to either align to the socially accepted movement of the time or invent new modes of narrative was promising for them. Most women's memoirists chose to move with the Movement of Memory-Writing in Iran which involves the narrators' memoirs related to the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Iranian women memoirists showed great fame and success in writing the genre. Moreover, the employment of humor genre in memoirs is another sign of resistance in Iranian women writing.

Keywords: Memoir, women autobiographer, narrative mode

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene en cuenta que durante la última década, más que nunca, las mujeres iraníes que se dedican al recuerdo desarrollaron la escritura de sus historias de vida para transmitir su mensaje a un público más amplio. En una sociedad donde "mantener la cara", "proteger la apariencia" y muchos más proverbios culturales son fuerzas preventivas en el camino de las memorias modestas, es crucial examinar qué les ha ayudado a afirmarse con éxito y revelar su voz. En este sentido, alinearse con el movimiento socialmente aceptado de la época o inventar nuevos modos de narración era prometedor para ellos. La mayoría de las memorias de mujeres eligieron moverse con el Movimiento de Memoria de Escritura en Irán, que involucra las memorias de los narradores relacionadas con la revolución iraní y la guerra Irán-Irak. Las mujeres iraníes mostraron gran fama y éxito al escribir el género. Además, el empleo del género humorístico en las memorias es otro signo de resistencia en las mujeres iraníes que escriben.

Palabras clave: memoria, autobiografía, modo narrativo.

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Recibido: 23/02/2019 Aceptado: 30/06/2019

Introduction

Persian memoir was emerged in early 19th century by Mirza Mustafā's travelogue. He was a political figure who has been sent to Georgia for some political discourse. His book of memoir describes in detail the events of this mission, his comments and impressions about the fellow travelers and the people facing them on the trip. Its description relies on memories, visits and personal perceptions in many sections. The general appreciation of the work of Mirza Mustafa caused the members of the other delegations abroad to write similar works (Fazeli, Iranian Oral History).

Later, some of the young people in this era found the opportunity to go abroad and learn new sciences and techniques and become familiar with the rapidly expanding fields of science and industry. On the other hand, they became familiar with the manifestations of Western civilization and somehow influenced by it. The result of these events, in addition to the profound social, political, cultural and economic impacts on Iran, is the accumulation of travelogues and memorabilia of written letters, some of which are known to the authors and some also belong to unknown and anonymous individuals (Fazeli).

Taj al-Saltanah was the first female memoirist, daughter of Naser al-Din Shah, the King of Persia from 1843 to 1896 in Qajar Dynasty. Taj al Saltaneh's memoirs, *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity* narrates the intense conflicts between life in harem and modernism.

In late nineteenth century, with the growth of feminism in the world, the process of women's Autobiographical writing accelerates, and writing memoir prevails in the world.

Today we see the most exciting memoirs coming out in 2018, introduces thirty best memoirs to the readers, including 22 autobiographies written by female writers and 8 memoirs by men (Kibler, 2018). Moreover Amazon Best Sellers books introduces eight memoirs out of top ten best autobiographies (popular products based on sales) written by women.¹ Iranian women have certainly been a part of this phenomenon of women's memoirs and have overwhelmingly heeded the call to testify to "unusual claims" upon the world (Malek, 2006, p 361). Unlike many female memoirists express disappointment with female memoirs, as Simone de Beauvoir said, 'Very often women think all they need to do is tell . . . the story of an unhappy childhood'(cited in McDonough,), some women memoirists have found their way to express themselves and represented an unveiled feminine voices to the world and showed their genius in writing memoir.

In the other hand, in Iran the context and motive for the trend towards memoirs of warfare captives continue to flourish. Development of oral history projects mainly among men, also forms a different kind of modern memoirs in Iran. People welcomed memory-telling and memory-writing; narrating the memories of the era after victory of Islamic Revolution can be considered as period of formation of a phenomenon called "Movement of Memory-Writing" (Behboodi, 2019). Yet the question is how women memoirists could follow their writing career and resist the masculine context and still reach fame and success.

Iranian Women Memoirists

An autobiography of a woman will necessarily present specificity in relation to a masculine autobiography. Heilbrun (1999) believes that there is one general purpose behind these female stories: to tell what has not been told before, or has not been told in the public sphere by women to women (Contemporary Memoir, p. 45). What is crucial in feminine studies of memoirs is not only should one pay attention to the content of the memoirs but also should be aware of the presenting or narrating the memoirs. *Veiled voices* the title Farzaneh Milani used for female autobiographers in an environment where the "work of many women have been slighted and excluded from literary histories and anthologies because the value structure of an almost entire male literary tradition insisted that only certain kinds of experience are worthy of serious consideration." (Najmabadi, p.11)

Some Iranian women memoirists, who stay and live in Iran, aligned to the post-war "Movement of Memory Writing" to record the history of pain and patience during and post war Iran.

Masoume Abad's memoirs *I'm Alive*, first published in 2012, is the story of a 17-year-old girl who is a politician now. Along with three other women, she has been imprisoned by the Ba'athist regime while working in medical clinic for the Iranian Red Crescent Society during the war. In her memoir she narrates about her childhood, Iran's Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and her four years captivity in Al-Rashid prison in Iraq. Maryam Erfanian's *The Way to Go* is another example. It is a memoir of Betul Khorshahi, a pre-revolutionary fighters and activists in the imposed war, who was captivated in her Haj travel by Al-Saudi in 1987.

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<https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Kindle-Store-Biographies-Memoirs-Authors/zgbs/digital-text/154758011>

The Days Without Mirror, edited by Golestan Jafarian, narrates the memoirs of Manijeh Lashgari, the wife of released pilot, Hossein Lashgari. The story is told of a woman who was not present at the war, but was seriously damaged by the war. Her husband was captivated at war and as a single parent; she had to manage her own life. She has spent fourteen years in complete ignorance and expectation. It took three more years for the visit to take place after the spouse was declared captive. The feeling of strangeness and suffering prevailed over their love and passion of youth.

Iranian women living in Iran preferred to move with the mainstream, with the movement of telling memoirs of war which is occurring in recent decade. In fact it's a sign of resistance. They not only resist the restrictions around them by joining the movement but also show their superiority over their male comrades in war by representing themselves in variety of roles more than men; as captives, social workers, wives, mothers, and etc. Erfanian goes further in her interview, saying: *The Way to Go* "is the story of the masculinity of Iranian women in war" (Mashregh news).

According Heilbrun (1999) entertaining or enlightening is not the objective of the women's writing memoirs today (Contemporary Memoir, p. 45). Thus, we should search for what has not been told in the public sphere. "The old forms of family, marriage, parenting, children, solitude, aging as well as the old forms of our professions still have to be dealt with by most women writers. However, instead of trying to fit new ideas into these old forms, today's women memoirists must invent or create a new form of memoir in which they discover themselves, reach fame, and recreate themselves." (Heilbrun, *Women's Lives*, p.66)

Another sign of resistance for Iranian female memoirists which is mostly represented in the writing of women memoirists living out of Iran is the employment of humor genre. Billingsley (2017) believes, "Humor is a promising method of feminist resistance, allowing women to shift oppressive scripts of discourse that discourage women from speaking to a context where women can speak on their own terms" (p. 20).

Satrap's graphic memoir is an attempt at cultural translation of the Iranian people and its history to non-Iranian communities. Her work thus not only creates a bridge between the diaspora and host communities, but works within the Iranian diaspora community as well, as she negotiates her own identity in exile, deals with the complications and desires of return, and creates, via culture and literature, a third space for her own identity as Iranian in exile (Amy Malek, 2006, p.380). Firoozeh Dumas, an Iranian immigrant living in America, is one of the outstanding memoirists who narrates her own life story and inspires readers to laugh even at the tense moments of her life experience. Female characters represented in *Funny in Farsi* are silenced or oppressed characters among the members of their family whose actions are also objects of fun in some cases. Her humor is grounded in her unique social experience which develops positive social solidarity with other ethnic groups in one hand and with her female readers on the other hand. Intimate, gentle and peace-building memoirs are remarkable traits of her jokes which engage constantly the readers. She is a sensitive observer of her social environment in her interactions with them. She cares for human interactions and enjoys appropriateness in communications.

Conclusion

In recent decade among women some literary-valued memoirs emerged with creative mode of representation which can be a sparkle of hope for the veiled voices of Iranian female autobiographers and memoirists. The current study represents how women living inside and outside of Iran try to resist the difficulties in their life. Women memoirists in Iran chose to move with the social and cultural movements of their time while narrating and sharing their experiences in patriarchal society of Iran to get their writings published. They narrate their experiences involving Iran's revolution and the Iran- Iraq war. However, those who live out of Iran negotiate their difficulties in humorous mode to build bridge with other ethnic groups and resist their surroundings.

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