

## **A TALE WORTH TOLD: NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM AND CONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY IN MASIH ALINEJAD'S *THE WIND IN MY HAIR: MY FIGHT FOR FREEDOM IN MODERN IRAN* (2018)<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper explores the conceptualization of freedom in the memoir of the Iranian-American journalist and media activist, Masih Alinejad. It examines *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018) with respect to Alinejad's activism in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran. The paper utilizes a critical framework drawn from feminist critiques of neoliberal feminism and Derridean hospitality to focus on Alinejad's repetition of the narratives of model minority and American exceptionalism. These neoliberal narratives have the potential to turn both Iran and the United States into inhospitable places for women. The paper concludes that an intersectional examination of Alinejad's neoliberal approach to the experiences of women in both the United States and Iran will demonstrate that it does not coincide with the demands of "Woman, Life, Freedom".

KEYWORDS: Masih Alinejad, intersectionality, hospitality, "Woman, Life, Freedom", neoliberalism.

**Una història que val la pena explicar: feminisme neoliberal i hospitalitat condicional a *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018), de Masih Alinejad**

Aquest article explora la conceptualització de la llibertat a les memòries de la periodista i activista digital iraniana-estatunidenca Masih Alinejad, tot examinant *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018) respecte a l'activisme d'Alinejad en el moviment "Dona, Vida, Llibertat" a l'Iran. S'utilitza un marc crític extret de les crítiques feministes del feminisme neoliberal i l'hospitalitat de Derrida per centrar-se en com Alinejad repeteix les narratives de la minoria model i l'excepcionalisme nord-americà. Aquestes narratives neoliberals tenen el potencial de convertir tant l'Iran com els Estats Units en llocs inhòspits per a les dones. L'article conclou que una lectura interseccional de l'enfocament neoliberal d'Alinejad sobre les experiències de les dones tant als Estats Units com a l'Iran demostra que no coincideix amb les reivindicacions del moviment "Dona, Vida, Llibertat".

PARAULES CLAU: Masih Alinejad, interseccionalitat, hospitalitat, "Dona, Vida, Llibertat", neoliberalisme.

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**Una historia que vale la pena contar: feminismo neoliberal y hospitalidad condicional en *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018), de Masih Alinejad**

Este artículo explora la conceptualización de la libertad en las memorias de la periodista y activista digital iraní-estadounidense Masih Alinejad, examinando *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018) respecto al activismo de Alinejad en el movimiento “Mujer, Vida, Libertad” en Irán. Se utiliza un marco crítico extraído de las críticas feministas del feminismo neoliberal y la hospitalidad de Derrida para centrarse en cómo Alinejad repite las narrativas de la minoría modelo y el excepcionalismo estadounidense. Estas narrativas neoliberales tienen el potencial de convertir tanto a Irán como a Estados Unidos en lugares inhóspitos para las mujeres. El artículo concluye que una lectura interseccional del enfoque neoliberal de Alinejad sobre las experiencias de las mujeres tanto en Estados Unidos como en Irán demuestra que no coincide con las reivindicaciones del movimiento “Mujer, Vida, Libertad”.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Masih Alinejad, interseccionalidad, hospitalidad, “Mujer, Vida, Libertad”, neoliberalismo.

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“We are strangers here”, said the young Kurdish man as he pleaded with “Morality Police” officers of the Islamic Republic pushing his twenty-two-year-old sister into a police van to take her to a detention center in Tehran. A few hours later, his sister was rushed to a hospital, where she died after three days. In this snapshot of the events surrounding the detention and killing of Mahsa (Jina) Amini on September 13, 2022 for her alleged “improper veiling”, Mahsa’s brother is invoking the sense of hospitality that Iranians are taught to practice and offer to their guests in order to try to release his sister. Regardless of their status, whoever is away from their home —tourists, pilgrims, or immigrants— is considered the responsibility of the residents of a city, and it is their obligation to guarantee their safety. Therefore, his use of the word “stranger” perfectly explains the massive reverberation of the killing of Mahsa Amini, who had travelled from the Kurdish city of Saqqez to the Iranian capital with her family for an end-of-summer vacation. For the brutal and deadly hospitality of the Iranian Morality Police reminded many Iranians of their own status as strangers in their home country. To be hospitable, one needs a home and a power over it and thus Mahsa Amini’s death epitomized Iranians’ gradual dispossession of autonomy over their homes as well as their bodies. For that reason, the epitaph on her grave, “Dear Jina! You are not dead. Your name will become a code”, proved to be prophetic, as her name became a symbol for all the people who see their estrangement reflected in Mahsa’s life/death. Mahsa’s Kurdish name, *Jina*, a derivative of the Kurdish root for “woman”, *jin*, and “life”, *jiyan*, resonates in the slogan of the protests that ensued following her murder: “*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*”, “Woman, Life, Freedom”. These three words reverberated throughout Iran and shaped a movement that surpassed the Iranian borders. They became a clarion call heard in almost all the continents of the globe as Iranian migrants

began to occupy the streets of their adopted homes to seek their fellow migrants, as well as their hosts, to support the movement and cry the slogan together. The movement's hospitable intersection between "woman", "life", and "freedom" managed to "transculturalize, transnationalize and transconceptualize" (Gerke et al., 2020: 5) a demand for freedom and bodily autonomy and thereby received worldwide support.

This paper explores the resonance of this intersection in the United States by analyzing the memoir of one of the most vocal Iranian-American journalists covering the news of the protests in Iran. *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018), by Masih Alinejad, focuses on the road that brought the author from a childhood in a remote village in the north of Iran to the United States, where she became an established journalist, specially well-known for her Internet campaign against the compulsory veil in Iran, known as "My Stealthy Freedom". Revisiting the memoir, published four years prior to the protests, allows for a better understanding of the author's failure to translate a movement, whose definition of freedom does not align with what Alinejad conceptualizes. By examining the memoir in the context of the recent protests and Alinejad's activism, it becomes clear that the author's concept of freedom falls short of the intersectional demand for bodily autonomy, which, in one of its many forms, has culminated in the fight against the compulsory veil in contemporary Iran. The aim of this article is, thus, to analyze Alinejad's misrepresentation of the Iranian women's struggle through a critical framework drawn from feminist critiques of neoliberal feminism and Derridean hospitality.

On the one hand, a critical examination of Alinejad's narrative through the lens of Derridean hospitality can provide a framework for contemplating the interweaving of various demands and necessities in diverse contexts. The absolute and unconditional hospitality considered by Derrida involves temporarily suspending the self to accommodate the desires of the other and can therefore facilitate the understanding of the slogan heard on the streets of Iran and its intersection with women's struggles in the United States. In *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture: Spaces, Bodies, Borders* (2017), among the many readings that Ana María Manzanás and Jesús Benito offer of Derridean hospitality, "utopian hospitality" is offered in terms of "proximity" or "approximation" of the self to the Other (2017: 21). Based on this unconditional hospitality, "the ethical self comes out of itself to meet the visiting Other halfway" (21). As "an interstitial experience" (22), utopian hospitality can be used as a framework to understand the ways in which the demands for freedom and bodily autonomy intersect and can be accommodated in both Iran and the United States. Intersectionality entails paying attention to "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (Crenshaw, 1991:

1244), in addition to the privilege and marginalization that arise out of a subject's specific social location (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020). As hospitality involves welcoming the experiences and needs of the stranger, it provides a framework to intersectionally analyze what demands and necessities are reflected in both the American and Iranian contexts. To put it another way, utopian hospitality serves to critically examine the neoliberal conditions of belonging and subjectivity.

On the other hand, a careful scrutiny of Alinejad's "asylum-worthy" narrative demonstrates her misrepresentation of Iranian women's struggle in the American context. In "Worthy: Neoliberalism and Narratives of (Im)migration" (2021), Ahoo Tabatabai problematizes this particular mode of storytelling whereby migrants represent themselves to be worthy of the place granted to them. According to Tabatabai, "U.S. policy toward immigrants rests on the assumption of relative value", which obligates the migrant to demonstrate a "potential to economically contribute" to the host society, as well as "being the right fit culturally" (2021: 26). Therefore, the narratives that migrants construct "are always intertwined with cultural expectations" (26).

Considering the neoliberal language in her storytelling, which leads to her incorporation of conservative discourses in the United States, it illustrates the way Alinejad misrepresents the protest movement she claims to lead (Filkins, 2022). Alinejad offers a mistranslation of "Woman, Life, Freedom" in the language of American exceptionalism, which has the potential to turn both Iran and the United States into inhospitable places for women. The doctrine of American exceptionalism is the claim that "the United States is not just the richest and most powerful of the world's more than two hundred states but is also politically and morally exceptional" (Hodgson, 2009: 10). Inherent to this myth, however, is the need for expansion, which helps to transform the United States into an imperial state (Reddy, 2011: 256) and thereby involves negative impacts on the lives of women in America and Iran. As will be demonstrated, *The Wind in My Hair* reproduces the narrative of American exceptionalism and its exclusionary coordinates of belonging, which extends hospitality to the familiar and the successful. This is done, on the one hand, by repeating a neoliberal, rags-to-riches story whereby success depends solely on individual struggle, while "matrices of domination", indicative of the way power is organized in a society (Hill Collins, 2000), are occluded. On the other hand, conceding to conditional hospitality, the narrative reaffirms that past life has to be relinquished and condemned to obtain the permission to begin a new life. Thus, being welcomed depends on leaving difference "like an offering" before entering the space of the host nation-state (Nayeri, 2017). Accordingly, the memoir establishes irreconcilable differences between the home country and the United States and represents the protagonist as a familiar subject to American audiences, captive in the Islamic Republic. The memoir's

narrator is portrayed as a worthy subject by emphasizing her similarity to what is considered desirable in the United States while her difference from her home country is simultaneously underlined. In this neoliberal theater of similarity and difference, women's freedom is recognized on the condition of upholding the myth of American exceptionalism. Accordingly, an intersectional examination of Alinejad's neoliberal approach to the experience of women in both the United States and Iran reflected in her memoir will demonstrate that it does not coincide with the demands of "Woman, Life, Freedom".

### **Captivity Narrative as an Asylum-Worthy Story**

The utopian/unconditional Law of hospitality (Derrida, 1999: 41) is the essence of the movement Alinejad claims to lead, where the oppressed and the marginalized have come together to demand visibility and equal rights. In Derrida's theorization of hospitality, the Law, which "dispenses with law, duty and even politics", operates in contrast with conditional hospitality that is juridico-political and "circumscribed by law and duty" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000: 135), resulting in the dissolution of the threshold between the self and the Other. As Derrida assures, hospitality serves as a transformative force that blurs borders, challenging their divisive nature. Contrarily, whereas in the practice of hospitality the difference between the host and guest wanes, Alinejad concedes to narratives of worthiness to write her autobiographical subject as a familiar character imprisoned in an unfamiliar place and perpetuates the dichotomy of deserving and undeserving individuals within the confines of her memoir.

This is the manner in which Alinejad engages in the interplay of familiarity and difference. In her worthy case of victimization, the backward, patriarchal Islamic Republic is presented as the antithesis of the United States. This antithetical relationship is implied by associating life in Iran with lack and restriction, starting with the very book cover, which shows the author in a white dress lifting a black veil off her head. The reader, who has seen this picture, opens the book to the first sentence of the memoir that reiterates the darkness of the life she lived in Iran. "It was pitch dark" (2018: 1), begins Alinejad as she remembers a night in her childhood when she is woken up by her brother, who despite being a year older than her, is terrified of the dark and begs her to accompany him on his way to the outhouse on the other side of their yard. To clearly set the dualism between the Islamic Republic and the United States, she draws another instance from her childhood, which clearly demonstrates the alternative to her restrictive society. Recounting watching cartoons that embodied freedom for her, with blond unveiled girls as their protagonists, she writes:

I looked at the pictures with great envy, the three heroines were girls with long blond hair loosely brushed or tied in a ponytail. Their hair was loose and not captive inside a piece of cloth. The girls were full of energy. They ran around, met people, made friends, and were active and happy. And they didn't have a hijab or veil. For me, it seemed they had freedoms that I didn't. (2018: 34)

The use of the word “captive” assists Alinejad in the opposition she draws between the restrictive Islamic Republic and the free United States. From the outset of the story, the alternative to what is denied her in her home country is obtainable in the United States. The abovementioned reference to the happy, active, blond girls who had the freedom that she did not is only one instance of the lack she constantly associates with life in Iran. The lack is likewise alluded to in the poverty her family endured, manifest in the single banana her father brought home for the six of them to share (2018: 22), the second-hand coats he bought her and her brother (2018: 23), as well as the second-hand boots that were too large for her feet (2018: 24).

Alinejad paints a thorough picture of restriction in the Islamic Republic that goes beyond social and economic restrictions. She sets the two countries against each other as she recounts the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, when she immediately draws the reader's attention to the undemocratic elections in Iran: “I was rooting for Hillary, the former First Lady and senator from New York. No woman can run for presidency in Iran” (2018: 257). In her hasty defense of the United States as the ultimate cradle of freedom, she falls short of mentioning the endemic patriarchy of American society evident in Clinton's failure to get elected. Instead, she goes on to portray the president, Obama, as the symbol of hope, and Clinton as a source of inspiration for women: “a Hillary victory could galvanize Iranian women to seek more political rights” (2018: 258). This dualism between her home and host countries is even visible at the linguistic level with the juxtaposition of the English word “stealthy” next to its Persian equivalent, “*yavashaki*”: “My life was stealthy and *yavashaki* and it only stopped when I came to the US” (2018: 344). Exuding no sense of linguistic hospitality, this application of language variance breaks no power relations. Accompanying the foreign word with its translation, Alinejad's text does not “disappropriate the reader from the host language and culture by taking him or her to the language and culture of the guest”, and thus fails to bring about “a sympathetic understanding of the Other” (Gerke et al., 2020: 6). The gloss fills any potential gaps left by an inaccessible cultural difference and thus serves the text's mimetic purpose: a *bona fide* representation of Iran. This approximation of Persian and English does not take place as a utopian leap toward a stranger, as the stranger is not accepted in its strangeness.

The stranger has to transform and be translated into the language of the host to be accepted. “The choice of leaving words untranslated”, as Bill Ashcroft et al. argue, “is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the ‘receptor’ culture, the higher status” (2002: 65). In this sense, the memoir’s glossing renders America as culturally superior. Consequently, and rather far from a hospitable accommodation of the Other, the text draws the reader to feel more at home in English, as Persian evokes images of fear and restriction. The contrast between Alinejad’s home and host country implies that, in her journey from obscurity to success and renown, everything foreign to American readers is also foreign to her, and the solution to this foreign menace is equally familiar to both the writer and the audience: the United States of America.

By marking “[t]he tension between a familiar ‘sameness’ and an ominous ‘difference’” (Naghibi, 2016: 52), the memoir manages to not only uphold the trope of model minority and promise success, but to also acquiesce to the conditions of belonging. To portray a protagonist similar to the American readers, the memoir draws on a literary tradition of captivity narratives, reminiscent of works of early Puritan settlers like Mary Rowlandson’s account (1682). Originally, captivity narratives either bore on the legacies of the colonial era or a revolutionary America. For the Puritan settlers arriving in the New World, captivity narratives “mark[ed] a passage in the development and deployment of a theology shaped by the need to construct a coherent sense of transcendent national destiny in a new land, in new circumstances” (Fitzpatrick, 1991: 20), whereas during the revolutionary period (1775-1783), the Other in these narratives shifted from the Indian threat to a more sinister enemy, the British military (Sieminski, 1990: 42). Regardless of who the menacing Other is, the “savage Indian” or the “brutal British military”, captivity narratives follow a straightforward pattern: the protagonist tells the account of her captivity beginning with references to her life before being captured, then proceeds to recount the encounter with the captors, and the reliance on her faith and values that comforted her during the time she suffered away from her home, before her eventual escape and arrival at her civilized community. These narratives contributed to the evolution of the myth of American exceptionalism, which conflates the ideal of liberty with the very essence of America.

Alinejad tells her story of migration in a similar fashion. The oppression and repression she had to endure in Iran come to an end only when she arrives in the United States. She describes this journey in a language of freedom and liberation that rings familiar to her American readers, as it is embedded in optimistic and deeply individualistic narratives of American success, such as the seminal *Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin. Repeating linear narratives that make up the American canon, she packages the concept of freedom through references to the

texts she read as a young woman, which were influential in her development of the idea of freedom, such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and the "Declaration of Independence" (2018: 57). By including a reference to the key texts in American history that are often studied by immigrants seeking naturalization, the author presents herself as an authentic American subject and implies that she has fulfilled her own manifest destiny by arriving at her intended home. Thus, she "inscribes [herself] into the narration of the nation through the wide gateway of autobiography" (Manzanas, 2011: 36). This trope can be traced in other texts by Iranian-American authors, a perfect example of which is Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003).

Out of a plethora of Iranian-American memoirs, Nafisi's memoir has been canonized as the prototype of literature telling the truth about the plight of Iranian women. Translated into more than thirty languages (DePaul, 2008: 73), it tells the story of an Iranian literature professor living and teaching in Tehran at the time of the Islamic Revolution (1979). As the coercive forces of the Revolution were gradually felt on academia, Nafisi resigns in protest to the mandatory veil and the Islamization of the universities. She then selects seven of her female students and creates a weekly book club to read and discuss great works of Western literature. In the story, the Western canon, read and discussed in the weekly book club, minimizes the differences between Iranians' and Westerners' reading practices. Contrary to the notion of utopian hospitality, which entails welcoming without the demand for recognition and similarity, Nafisi's memoir appeals to the reader's sympathy by minimizing the difference between her Iranian students and the American readers. In an ironically similar fashion to Alinejad's memoir, Nafisi's book cover evokes a sense of similarity and difference by juxtaposing something familiar, the story of Lolita and her captivity at the hands of her stepfather, with something different: Tehran, a synecdoche for the restrictive Islamic regime. This title is then imposed on an image of two young Iranian women covered in black clothes, engrossed in reading a text hidden from the viewers' eyes. From early responses to the text, such as the extremely sardonic criticism of Hamid Dabashi's frequently cited "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire" (2006), to Jodi Melamed's reading of the memoir's embrace of neoliberal multiculturalism in *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (2011), scholars have underlined the place of literature in the ideological reconstruction of global capitalism.

As prominently featured on the cover of *The Wind in My Hair*, Nafisi's endorsement of Alinejad's memoir aligns it with Iranian-American memoirs that explore parallel themes and narratives, such as Nafisi's own. Nafisi describes Alinejad's personal story as "intriguing and inspiring, for her freedom is not just political but existential" (cover copy). This aligns with Melamed's critique of the



role of these texts within neoliberal multiculturalism (2011: 141), as Alinejad's portrayal of the journey from bondage to liberation reflects the dominant American cultural narrative of immigration, celebrating individuals who embody the neoliberal values of "independence, self-reliance and self-sufficiency" (Tabatabai, 2021: 22). Just as Nafisi's autobiographical narration, depicting the contours of who is fit for (neo)liberal subjectivity, Alinejad's protagonist is portrayed as a worthy subject through her adherence to such values. The opening pages are crucial to the character that Alinejad constructs throughout the story as a leader ahead of everyone else who always aims for "higher and higher" in different settings. Remembering one of her "favorite pastimes" as a young girl sneaking into the neighbor's garden "and climb[ing] their trees to pick pears and walnuts", Alinejad writes about

rising higher and higher leaving my brothers and friends behind, much to the chagrin of my mother who complained that clambering up trees was not for girls. But I couldn't help it. Even today, whenever I see a fruit tree, my first impulse is to scramble to the very top branch. I've climbed in search of plums outside the Vatican and for pears in London. (2018: 9)

Her character's journey, which embodies a linear movement from rags to riches, aligns with neoliberal values. One of the defining characteristics of neoliberalism is its focus on the individual's pursuit of personal improvement and advancement, and this emphasis is visible in her search for new heights to climb. In her upward mobility, she rises higher above the rest who cannot catch up with her, and despite the gender restrictions that her mother set on her, the traits that made her fit for leadership have stayed with her from her village home to the European cities she visited after she left Iran, and in the United States where she launched her campaign. Additionally, the protagonist's willingness to forge ahead without regard for the advice or assistance of others is emphasized throughout the narrative. This is exemplified in the opening scene described further above, in which the protagonist ignores her brother's pleas to "wait... wait" (2018: 7) for him as she navigates the path from the house to the outhouse. The reason her brother has lagged behind is precisely because he has stopped to fetch a lantern, whose "dim light" the protagonist is tempted to reject (2018: 3). Despite his efforts to catch up, he struggles to keep pace with her, and even one of his slippers falls off in the process. In contrast, the protagonist is depicted as independent and self-sufficient, confidently staring into the dark (2018: 7) and facing challenges without assistance. This portrayal of the protagonist as resolutely independent and self-reliant reinforces the memoir's embrace of the values of individualism and self-sufficiency.

This emphasis on individual achievement, intrinsic to the model minority trope, creates a hierarchy among migrants, leading to exclusion and prejudice.

Those who are more similar to an archetypal American subject are readily welcomed into American society, while those who do not fit the narrative may face barriers and discrimination. This distorted view of migration and migrants makes it more difficult for those who are not seen as valuable human capital. Accordingly, the asylum-worthy narrative of the model minority is not solely a matter of cultural assimilation. Rather, it involves demonstrating the immigrant's potential for economic success (Ong, 2006; Tabatabai, 2021; Wanzo, 2020). As the following section illustrates, Alinejad's story reflects the merit-based immigration policy, where a migrant's likelihood of upholding the neoliberal system determines their eligibility for hospitality.

### **A Tale of Success: Individual Choice**

A detailed examination of the memoir reveals that Alinejad espouses a neoliberal feminist viewpoint, as evidenced by her belief that success is a matter of individual choice and effort. This perspective is exemplified by her Internet campaign's endorsement by Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. When her campaign reached 200,000 followers on Facebook, Alinejad recounts a conversation between herself and her partner, who informs her of Sheryl Sandberg's interest in "My Stealthy Freedom". "Sandberg", learns Alinejad, "one of America's best-known women leaders and feminists, and the author of the best-selling book *Lean-in*, had talked about My Stealthy Freedom at *Fortune* magazine's Most Powerful Women Summit" (2018: 365). Not knowing who Sandberg is, Alinejad starts to research her and describes her as a "powerful", "feminine", "business leader, totally at ease and self-confident on the global stage", "saying the same things [Alinejad] believes in" (2018: 366). Sheryl Sandberg owns the campaign "Lean-in", named after her memoir *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), where she encourages women to fulfill their ambitions by seeking circles of women with similar ambitions. Finding her to be the best person to address the Iranian followers of "My Stealthy Freedom", Alinejad approaches Sandberg on Facebook's Women's Leadership Day event in 2016 and asks her to send a message to the Iranian women, to which she consents:

I want to say to all the amazing women on My Stealthy Freedom's page how much we all support you, how much women around the world are cheering for you, how much we all want to live in a world where every single woman has civil rights, civil liberties, opportunities to live as she wants to live, and the sisterhood that all of us have together around the world. (2018: 372)

Alinejad was asking Sandberg to endorse her Internet campaign because Iranian women had “leaned in” and become the “privileged recipient[s] of first world concern” (Radcliffe, 1994: 26). By gaining the support of powerful American women leaders and earning the attention of American women who “support” and “are cheering for” the Iranian women who have “leaned in”, Alinejad’s campaign is able to associate itself with the discourse of American exceptionalism and neoliberal multiculturalism and position itself as deserving of the opportunities and freedom offered by the United States. In this rather fantastic spectacle devoid of anti-Iranian sentiment, Islamophobia and racism, with diversity “cast as the essence of neoliberal exchange” (Melamed, 2011: 145), American women are standing at the end of the global road to liberty, encouraging their brown sisters to persevere. Reiterating the trope of model minority and embracing the merit-based system of worth, evident and countable in the number of her followers, Alinejad excludes those who are unable or unwilling to demonstrate their “value for neoliberal circuits” (150) in tangible and countable ways from the realm of her neoliberal multicultural subjectivity.

Alinejad’s model of feminism is similar to Sandberg’s, which has been alternatively labelled as “neo-liberal” (Rottenberg, 2014), “one-percent” (Burnham, 2021), or corporate feminism, and has been criticized for praising women such as Thatcher “for their power” (Faludi, 2013). Sandberg’s model of feminism highlights the oppression women around the world suffer, while simultaneously promising a panacea to every problem that women face: leaning in. Ideological campaigns such as Sandberg’s “Lean In” create the semblance of autonomy and empowerment in individuals by advertising the idea that emancipation is universally obtainable (Hutchings, 2007: 92). By disavowing “the social, cultural and economic forces producing inequality” (Rottenberg, 2014: 420), empowerment is presented as contingent upon personal choices and efforts; success lies at arm’s length, and thus the only thing that women require for their empowerment is free of charge: a Facebook account. Alinejad had a similar approach in her Internet campaign, “My Stealthy Freedom”, where she encouraged women to send pictures of themselves to her to upload:

Most women in Iran are always in low-power poses, but the women sending photographs to My Stealthy Freedom were the opposite —they stood tall, they held their arms aloft, they were showing the world that the Iranian women were free, powerful, and not ashamed of their bodies. They were smiling, happy, not scowling *as if* through this simple act of rebellion women could be empowered. (2018: 337; emphasis added)

For Alinejad, women’s subjection in Iran could be overcome by uploading unveiled photos. Needless to say, the power that lay in the insurrection practiced by

Iranian women who appeared unveiled in the streets and thus defied the discriminatory laws of the Iranian state is undeniable. It is equally indisputable that through social media many Iranian women found each other and saw their desires for liberation reflected in other women's unveiled photos. The issue with the portrayal of empowerment of Iranian women in this context is that the use of "as if" does not fully capture the complexity and nuance of their experiences. In this way, those women who have "leaned in" to her Internet campaign and sent her photos of their empowered selves are drawn in stark contrast to the rest of the women who have not leaned in yet and are thus in "low-power poses". Apart from insinuating that it is impossible to be veiled and empowered, she represents herself as the epitome of empowerment and success, while she hides the fact that for her success, and just like Sandberg, Alinejad needs the "leaning in" of other women. To illustrate this, she has rendered the Iranian women's videos and stories into her own commodity with her campaign's trademark imprinted on them, appropriated Iranian women's experience to better her own position (Mohanty, 1988: 62), and negotiated their bodies for her own "entrepreneurial self-branding" (Negra, 2014: 275). Thus, the problem with Alinejad's representation is that it obscures the reality that success and empowerment require more than mere individual choice and ignores the intersecting forms of oppression faced by Iranian and American women. This corroborates the claim that, for an "opportunistic feminist" such as Alinejad, it is acceptable to exploit other women's bodies as a means of advancing her own empowerment (Zanganeh, 2019).

Alinejad's campaign garnered support from neoliberal feminists like Sandberg not only because of her conflation of the "desire" to be free with the "power" to be free, but also due to her promotion of the myth of American exceptionalism. "As new categories for distinguishing more-worthy from less-worthy persons come to overlay conventional racial categories, traditionally recognized racial identities" (Melamed, 2011: 151) such as Muslim, Christian, foreign-born, second-generation, female, queer, black, brown, are all cast as interchangeable protagonists in the retelling of this age-old myth. This neoliberal multicultural fairy tale oversimplifies the complex interplay between the law and societal factors that affect an individual's ability to fully exercise their rights; yet it endures, perpetuated by the belief that upon being granted admission into the nation, one is automatically guaranteed access to freedom and equal treatment under the law. Accordingly, the semblance of freedom that being included inside the law offers epitomizes the tenets of neoliberal multiculturalism, which is best explored by Chandan Reddy's critique of the inclusion of an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2010. This act recognized violence against individuals on account of their gender or sexual orientations as a hate crime. As the NDAA decides the annual budget allocated to the Department of Defense, Reddy provides a detailed

exposition of the act, focusing particularly on the budgetary provisions for the United States military's foreign wars and the national response to the act. While the Great Recession in the United States had afflicted the lives of many Americans, the allocation of \$680 billion to the Department of Defense intrigued Reddy to examine the intersection between an increase in the number of troops dispatched to Afghanistan and the endorsement of the act for its defense of minority rights. This extravagance is an example of the way "liberal-multicultural ideology persuaded Americans to accept capital flight abroad in the name of being antiracist and cosmopolitan" (Melamed, 2011: 35). Commenting on this "strange coupling of civil rights and national security", Reddy views the act as a *carte blanche* to increase the state's purview in inflicting violence under the pretext of national security and law enforcement (2011: 5). He uses this framework of legitimizing violence through the rhetoric of civil liberties to expose the perils of neoliberal multiculturalism and contends that this approach is not about granting freedom from violence to minorities but rather gaining freedom with violence for the state.

Scholars of the Iranian diaspora, including Neda Maghbooleh, shed light on the limitations of seeking inclusion within the framework of the law as a means to escape prejudice and violence. In her book *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (2017), Maghbooleh emphasizes that indeed "immigrants' social integration or whitening into a mainstream American identity is possible based on socioeconomic achievement" as "the majority of Iranian-Americans hold bachelor's degrees or higher, own their homes, and work in white collar professions", and "possess significantly greater levels of income and education than the average American" (2017: 169). However, Maghbooleh is quick to note that "in contradiction to long-standing sociological theories about immigration and assimilation, no amount of occupational prestige, income, wealth, or residential integration can seemingly save Iranian-Americans from being cast out as culturally impure, and by extension, racially non-white" (2017: 46). This contradiction is best exemplified by the Iranian embassy crisis. Following the assault on the American embassy in Tehran by a faction of Muslim fundamentalists during post-revolutionary Iran, Iranian migrants in the United States encountered an unprecedented wave of animosity from Americans. Firoozeh Dumas, another writer from the Iranian diaspora, highlights the irony of Iranians being subjected to violence because of the 444-day crisis and wonders why Iranians, with their "work ethic and obsession with education", are targeted, even though "as a group [they] are among the most educated and successful immigrants in this country" (2004, 118).

The insights offered by Reddy and Maghbooleh about the shortcomings of neoliberal multiculturalism can be extended to Alinejad's repetition of American exceptionalism. Examined through an intersectional lens, Alinejad's approach to the

women's movement in Iran and the United States illuminates the profound influence of transnational capitalism on domestic and foreign policies. This can be exemplified through two instances: the impact of sanctions and the issue of abortion.

### **Which Women? What Life? Whose Freedom?**

As a forerunner of the myth of American exceptionalism, the notion of Manifest Destiny justified American imperialist expansion by claiming that “the world's greatest democracy had grown naturally, providentially, into its God-given skin [and denied] that it, like so many other nations, has a history of empire building” (Wrobel, 2013: 24). This ideology can be traced in twentieth-century multiculturalism that presents the United States as a model of global diversity. Disguising imperialist pursuits, neoliberal multiculturalism, as Melamed maintains, convinced “Americans to affirm a positive cultural pluralism by recognizing that ‘we are the world’” (2011: 35). Thus, for the immigrant activist who has *leaned in* to American neoliberalism, the democracy and freedom she enjoys in her host country can be enjoyed in her home country as well, if only the latter also follows its natural, providential God-given course of conforming to the American model. My first example fits this imperial expansion perfectly: the sanctions that Alinejad staunchly supports.

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, the United States, in conjunction with the UN Security Council and the European Union, have enforced a range of sanctions targeting not only the Iranian government but also individuals, private businesses, and state-owned enterprises operating within the country. Due to its extensive political and commercial ties with various countries around the world, the United States has been able to effectively extend many of its unilateral sanctions against Iran to other nations, thereby constraining Iran's economic interactions. In 2015, with the lifting of various sanctions, there was hope that the economic downturn experienced by Iranian households would come to an end and there would be an increase in *per capita* welfare, as well as a reduction in inflation. However, with the onset of Donald Trump's presidency, economic sanctions were reimposed. Interestingly, in a speech announcing the reinstatement of sanctions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo linked the sanctions to women's rights issues in Iran, framing the economic pressure as a means to advance gender equality: “As seen from the hijab protests, the brutal men of the regime seem to be particularly terrified by Iranian women who are demanding their rights. As human beings with inherent dignity and inalienable rights, the women of Iran deserve the same freedoms that the men of Iran possess” (The Heritage Foundation). In a manner reminiscent of the paternalistic stance taken by George W. Bush's administration towards Afghan women, for whom a war was justified in the name of liberation (Cloud, 2004), Pompeo is presenting the United States as the defender of Iranian

women's rights. He was addressing the protests earlier that year by the women who came to be known as the "Girls of the Revolution Street" and were seen on camera standing unveiled on platforms such as telecommunication boxes in various cities, waving a stick with a white veil attached to it. Less than a year later, Alinejad met with Pompeo to "raise the voice of Iranian women to the world" (Shojaee, 2019). In a classic case of *déjà vu*, Alinejad is evoking the well-known phrase by Spivak, calling for support to "save brown women from brown men", which resonates with Pompeo's mention of the "brutal men of the regime".

Political and media discourses such as Alinejad's tend to "frame Iranian state attacks on women's rights as only confirming the need for economic sanctions" (Tafakori, 2021: 51). Ironically, and quite poignantly, the draconian sanctions, re-imposed by the Trump administration under its "maximum pressure campaign" to force Iran to "realign its foreign policy to US diktats in the Middle East" (Nuruz-zaman, 2020: 2), have had a specially negative impact on the health and well-being of Iranian women (Kokabisagh, 2018; Heydari and Milani, 2022). The sanctions caused a decline in the living standards of Iranians, including higher rates of unemployment and inflation, and decreased access to nutritious food, healthcare, and medications. This also led to a decrease in the material well-being of female-headed households, which was exacerbated by urban-rural, gender, and class disparities. Rural, poor, female-headed households were particularly affected by these negative impacts.

The second example that also captures Alinejad's failure to fully understand the political dimensions of the struggle for women's rights is her alignment with pro-life politicians in the United States, such as Mike Pompeo, Jim Risch, and Bill Hagerty (Iran International, 2021; Palladino, 2019). Pro-life policies, rather than providing genuine support for life, outlaw a woman's control over her own body and reproductive choices. It is ironic for Alinejad to advocate "choice" while simultaneously siding with politicians who oppose bodily autonomy and support restrictive pro-life laws. The contradiction is epitomized in her recent appearance in a photo with Morgan Ortagus, the former Spokesperson for the United States Department of State, a staunch pro-life proponent, wearing a T-shirt that reads "Woman, Life, Freedom". Not only is it generally suggested that the "pro-life position is really about controlling women and about race" (Superson, 2014: 304), but the disturbing irony that the majority of pro-life supporters are in favor of the death penalty (Superson, 2014: 303) demonstrates that "woman", "life" and "freedom" are catachreses in Alinejad's feminist discourse. Catachresis, the misuse of words that results in a harsh or incongruous combination, signals the distortion of the message of the movement Alinejad claims to lead. By advocating for restrictive pro-life laws, these politicians demonstrate a narrow understanding of what it means for a woman to lead a dignified life and be truly free. This catachresis reveals

that emancipation is only applicable to a certain type of woman leading a certain type of life. Contrary to the hospitable call of the slogan to approach the intersection between women's needs, the Iranian women's movement is used as a tool for perpetuating the intersecting forms of oppression faced by both Iranian and American women. Alinejad's association with these politicians further exposes the limitations of her neoliberal feminist perspective, which emphasizes individual choice and effort as the key to empowerment but fails to address the root causes of inequality and oppression.

## Conclusion

The call of hospitality, with its ties to home and belonging, is echoed in the cry of "Woman, Life, Freedom", which arose from the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini and highlights the need for an intersectional approach to women's needs in the United States and Iran. However, Alinejad's repetition of neoliberal multicultural worthiness in her activism and memoir, *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018), is misleading. It creates a narrow and exclusionary definition of hospitality, conflates liberty with liberalism and presents it as the panacea to Iranian women's problems. By ignoring larger interlocking systems of power and oppression, Alinejad's asylum-worthy narrative accommodates discourses that contribute to America and Iran being inhospitable spaces for women. It can therefore be concluded that Alinejad's (self)representation has "elide[d] the particular location of women of color, and thus become yet another source of intersectional disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245).

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