

## ***Not Without My Daughter: An Orientalist Analysis***

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the relationship between the East and the West in Betty Mahmoody's memoir *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) written along with William Hoffer. The novel is written with as well as caters to the Oriental Perspective. This is a result of the stark difference between the culture, ethnicity, beliefs, ideologies, practices which further the stereotypes. The paper examines the representations and binaries that emerge while portraying the East in Betty Mahmoody's memoir.

**Keywords:** *Not Without My Daughter*, Betty Mahmoody, Orientalism, culture, stereotypes.

The then affluent Persian Empire, now the Iranian Islamic State has been in the news since 1979 for various issues related to politics, religion, war, economy and so on. The American puppet government of the Shah was overthrown in 1979 which was a source of joy for the people of Iran. The reinstatement of the Ayatollah was a symbol of pride and religious triumph that the revolution had promised. However, the regime of the Ayatollah was suppressive and conservative. Development was set back and liberty of people especially that of women saw a major downfall.

Immediately after the reinstatement of the Ayatollah the Hostage crisis took place during which the American embassy in Iran was taken over by the Iranian mob. The reinstatement of the Ayatollah was looked upon differently in the West (mainly America) and in the East (Iran). Within the East also not everyone was happy with the reinstatement of the Ayatollah. This was also the time Iran was attacked by Iraq and it was largely believed to be the result of USA's support to Iraq; this made matters more hostile between the two countries (America and Iran).

Betty Mahmoody's memoir *Not Without My Daughter* written along with William Hoffer is situated in this era of turmoil between the countries. The book was published in 1987. This book is based on the true story of Betty Mahmoody who was held captive by her husband in Iran. The book follows her struggles and experiences and finally her escape after eighteen months of captivity along with her daughter Mahtob Mahmoody through the mountains of Tehran.

In *Not Without My Daughter* Betty demonizes Iran while painting a rosy picture of Detroit despite the riots and racial turmoil in Detroit that took place during the 70's and the 80's (Chan-Malik 113). *Not Without My Daughter* is a hegemonic description of Iran and Islam which came out at a crucial time and influenced the view of many. This portrayal furthers the stereotypes of Iran created by the west and makes it the 'Other'. The stereotypical portrayal of Iran in this novel is problematic and Betty Mahmoody uses the socio-political relations between the two countries as well as the environment of Iran as a cover to substantiate her story and representations of Iranians. This novel is readily accepted by the American society as it propagates the western degenerated view of the east which in this context is Iran.

The objective of the paper is to examine the representations and binaries that emerge in the portrayal of the East. Betty Mahmoody's memoir *Not Without My Daughter* homogenizes Iranians and represents them as a backward, primitive, fanatical, religious extremists. This paper analyses instances from the book that point to this and attempts to present the Iranians that were not fanatical and backward. Not all the Iranians were primitive and the status of women was not good however there were improvements.

The paper looks into the following questions. How does the socio-political context affect the novel? How do themes in the novel propagate the Oriental understanding? How was the novel received? How was Betty Mahmoody received as a public figure? The research will undertake a sociological understanding of the text along with the thematic analysis of the text. It will employ a postcolonial framework using the Orientalism theory by Edward Said to analyze the narrative of the text.

Postcolonialism as a theoretical concept is not monolithic. It takes three forms: one constructed by Spivak, second by Homi Bhabha and third by Edward Said. Edward Said's Orientalism is the third concept in Postcolonialism. Orientalism is the perspective of the west and it creates the 'Other'. It forms the identity of the west – the Occident by creating a degenerate identity of the east. Orientalism, according to Said, is more about the west than the Orient itself (Ning 57).

Whetten's article was written after the 1979 revolution in Iran. It talks about the lessons America learnt from their hold of Iran. The relationship between America and Iran is understood from this article and furthers the socio-political understanding (Whetten 391-399). Iran, the United States and a Political Seesaw is an article from the International New York Times. It is a timeline of the relationship between America and Iran which helps with the sociological understanding of the text. It helps place the socio-political context of the text.

From the article 'Western Media Representations, Iran, and Orientalist Stereotypes' the points that have been gathered are Iran is portrayed largely by the Western media as the Other which forms the dominant hegemonic understanding. The stereotypes attached to Iran are primitive, barbaric, fundamentalist, dirty, despotic, orthodox and authoritative. Sylvia Chan-Malik's article depicts how the Western media has contributed to the Racist – Oriental understanding of the veil in the Middle-East. A reference to Betty Mahmoody's memoir is made as an example of the misrepresentation of the Middle East as she points to 'unfreedom' of the Middle East in comparison to the 'freedom' in America while overlooking the unrest that prevailed in Detroit (Chan-Malik 112-140).

The idea of a tortured white American woman being oppressed by the inhuman laws of the East as depicted in the movie which is an adaption furthers my argument of the Orientalist reading of the book. The movie has been under much criticism due to the representation of the East. However, this does not affect the way the book was received. The book has been cited and used as a reference in a number of research papers which shows how the book was received and acceptance of the Orientalist presentation of the book. In response to the book and novel, Sayyed Bozorg Mahmoody, Betty Mahmoody's husband was featured in a documentary 'Without My Daughter' (2002) which spoke about his side of the story. It was made by Alexis Kouros in Finland. This is also open for further study as it is not included in the scope of the paper.

Even though *Not Without My Daughter* is called Betty Mahmoody's memoir but it was co-written by William Hoffer. Therefore, which parts are written by who cannot be accounted for and terming it a memoir then is problematic. This aspect is not accounted for in the paper and can be taken up for further study. Also, there is a movie that was made based on this novel in the year 1991 made by Brian Gilbert. This was the time according to Said many accounts that were initially not given importance were added to the discourse of the Oriental view of Iran (Said 341-394). The review of the movie *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) by Carol Anne Douglas explains how the movie was problematic. The movie, however, is not included in the paper.

The representations and binaries of Iran that emerge from Betty Mahmoudy's memoir *Not Without My Daughter* contribute to the Oriental understanding of Iran in the light of socio-political context of America and Iran during 1980's.

Betty Mahmoudy, an American is married to Sayyed Bozorch Mahmoudy (Moody) who is known as 'Moody' and is an Iranian. They have a daughter Mahtob Mahmoudy. The family lives in Detroit until Moody suggests a vacation of two weeks to Tehran. Betty meets this suggestion with reluctance as she thinks it is unsafe which shows the prejudice she holds towards Iran which is a consequence of the socio-political relationship between the two countries. This strain in their relationship due to the cultural difference was witnessed not just during Betty's stay in Iran which lasted eighteen months until her escape with Mahtob but also the time the couple was in America.

The memoir begins with the theme of motherhood which is emphasized through the title as well. This theme is prevalent throughout the novel which makes the reader biased as it evokes emotions and sympathy for a mother. Throughout the novel her anxieties and portrayals which may be extreme are justified through her concern for her daughter Mahtob. There is a sense of doubt and apprehension on Betty's part as she wishes to return to America even before landing in Iran as she worries for her daughter's safety. In the first few pages negativity is established and there is already a creation of the 'Other'.

What was an American woman doing flying into a country that had the most openly hostile attitude toward Americans of any nation in the world? Why was I bringing my daughter to a bitter land that was embroiled in a bitter war with Iraq? (qtdin. Hoffer, Mahmoudy)

Later in the account there is a part where after beating Betty like an animal he keeps her away from her daughter. This adds to her plight. Betty does not refer to the place as Tehran until much later and only fleetingly. For the major part of the novel except for a few instances she refers to the place as Iran which feeds to the readers apprehensions of the country. The usage of Iran instead of Tehran amplifies the doubts of the reader. She also refers to Iran as the 'troubled land'. This makes the stereotypes more jarring. The stereotypes that were created by the media as in the article 'Western Media Representations, Iran, and Orientalist Stereotypes' are furthered in *Not Without My Daughter*.

Throughout the novel Betty portrays Iranians to be dirty, unhygienic and backward. The themes of primitiveness and cleanliness are present throughout the narrative. From the very beginning when she claims the air of Tehran has a stench of sweat, it is overcrowded with people who are not civilized and sensible enough to form a queue and the

washrooms are not hygienic for her daughter or any human for that matter to use infested with roaches. She views Moody's extraordinarily large family in comparison to the nuclear family she belongs to, only keeping in touch with her parents, as a sign of lack of civilization. She highlights the practice of endogamy and its results in the deformities of the children. There is no effort made by her to understand their culture. From the outset she is biased and the socio – political differences between America and Iran are used to reason this bias and portrayal of Iran as the degenerate 'Other'. The relationships in the family seem complicated to Betty and only those who speak English or are dressed in the western attire are considered clean and civilized by her.

For instance, she likes Zia Hakim as he wore a suit and spoke to her in English. Even though she did not approve of Reza who once lived with them in America she now thought of him as a familiar only because he spoke English. Throughout the novel language is an important theme. She is apprehensive of those who speak Farsi, especially Ameh Bozorg, the matriarchal figure in the family and Moody's older sister. Ameh Bozorg especially along with the rest of Moody's relatives according her narrative who do not believe in taking a bath as it ruins the skin. She describes Ameh Bozorg's kitchen as the filthiest place unfit for cooking.

She gives instances of there being 'spoonful of bugs' in the food and Moody having to swallow them as he has to be courteous. She comments on their diet as it is 'too oily' as it is a sign of wealth in Iran. Other than this in the novel she further feeds to the stereotype of uncivilized as she describes hoe Ameh Bozorg and a religious head who visit their house spill sugar while infesting their tea with it. Later on when Moody and her have a house of their own and they invite Ameh Bozorg and her husband along with other elders for dinner as part of the customs she describes how a clean house within a matter of minutes had bits of food scattered all over. She compares it to the place where her five year old daughter ate was spotless with no droppings.

Even when they live in the homes of Mammal and Nasserine; Reza and Essey, in her description of them and their homes the theme of cleanliness is prevalent which makes it more like an assessment of them. She comments on the practices of everyone while keeping the idea of cleanliness. She calls Mammal a 'scruffy Iranian', she identified them either as Moody's relatives or Iranians mostly. Her description of the market place contributes further to the stereotype of Iran. In the market place the practice of kneading the dough while the baker is sweaty and in some places with their feet adds to the unhygienic and uncivilized portrayal. The market place is overcrowded and filled with chador clad women. She describes

the encounters she has with the pasdars (the Ayotollah's police who keep a check on the dressing and the moral codes) which is sure to invoke sympathies of the reader. Her portrayal of the Iranians in general is in the shades of black and white, that is, they are either good or bad based on their familiarity with English and if they do know English they were nice people. According to her portrayal it can be deduced that according to her only those who know English are humane, good and literate, the others were uncultured savages.

Anyone who has helped her is kind and civilized. Everyone who helped her escape was portrayed with a manner of kindness and civility. Another instance of the primitivism is the men beating their wives and their acceptance of this as though it is the right thing. Her using birth control was a crime. She calls them barbaric when she describes the tradition of sacrificing a goat as they enter the house and having to cross over as a sign of good omen. Concepts of evil eye and the devil are explained in the context of Ameh Bozorg. She also shows the stereotype of a corrupt Orient as Moody begins his practice without a proper license which is made unavailable to him due to his American education.

Betty portrays the binary of American education versus the Iranian education. When Mahtob goes to school the children are taught with the method of rote learning and are made to recite 'Death to America' in Farsi. The Iranian education system is then viewed as reductive and primitive.

Although Moody's countrymen officially hate Americans, they venerate the American educational system. (qtdin. Hoffer, Mahmoody)

This shows how she created the 'other' although there is a contradiction here as the Iranians wanted American education during the time of the Shah but then during the Khomeini regime American education was the cause of Moody being unable to resume his practice. There are various other statements made by her that give her an individual identity while the others have a community identity. For instance,

I must smell like the rest of them now. (qtdin. Hoffer, Mahmoody)

Throughout the narrative is written with a hindsight bias. This also serves to help to further victimize Betty as the helpless mother. The narrative in the flashback when she recounts the time the couple was in America she explains it with a sense of knowing. The narrative comes across as she always knew the relationship would culminate to this point. She rationalizes not acting upon her fears due to her insecurities of being divorced and being unable to give her sons from the previous marriage a father figure. This is the main reason she stayed in denial. The narrative consists of her experience of Iran, the flashbacks of when

she was in America and her escape from Iran along with her daughter and the events that led to it.

In the flashback the events that unfold and the turmoil in the relationship is portrayed along the same timeline during which the socio-political conflicts between Iran and America took place. She relays the conflicts between her and Moody and changes in his behavior, which were the cause of the change in their relationship, while interweaving them with the socio-political events like the revolution, its end with the return of the Ayotollah and the hostage crisis. She only recounts those moments of conflict that she and Moody had had when the conflicts between America and Iran took place. She did not choose to recount any other times. For instance, when the revolution was at its peak Moody became aware of his nationality. He withdrew his application of American citizenship, he bought a transistor radio to get the news of Iran that according to him was not filtered by American media and would get a continuous supply of it instead of snatches from the American news. He became religious as well as threw out their expensive liquor collection without consulting her. Throughout the narrative she victimizes herself.

When Betty was in America her relationship with Moody went through a bitter phase due to their arguments about politics and their respective countries. All these arguments are portrayed such that Moody is the one who instigates her and attacks her country while she only responds to defend herself and her country. It was her who suggested a truce due to her desperation. The use of the word 'desperation' shows how she was insecure and held on to the relationship. She attributed most of the conflicts to their cultural difference. For her they were equal partners whereas for him, he was the sole owner of their property. And initially she found his possessiveness endearing but through the hindsight bias she saw it as an indicator to end her relationship. All the events leading to their stay in Iran which take place in America have an edge of the hindsight bias and are carefully intertwined with the socio-political scenario.

Throughout the narrative by depicting Iranians as uncivilized, unhygienic, barbaric, primitive, despotic, fanatical she depicts Americans as civilized, hygienic, modern, democratic, secular nation. She creates a binary between herself, an American and Moody and his relatives, the Iranians. This representation of the other which thereby creates a representation of the self is the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said which is basically a certain Western perspective of the East. By creating the 'other', the image of self is then formed. Betty represents the common Iranians in their everyday lives however there is a

certain exaggeration in the way she portrays them as is seen in the analysis above. This shows how the themes in the novel propagate the Oriental beliefs.

She does not portray the class of people who had Communist beliefs, the class that in its own way rebelled against the Shah regime and had modern progressive ideas. This class is depicted in Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* that is set around the same time. *Persepolis* is also a memoir and Satrapi belonged to the line of the Qajdang rulers. She and her family had modern beliefs and rebelled against the Shah regime in their own way. They had their own beliefs and their practices were based on these beliefs. The political and social scenario in Iran was as Betty explains it; however the representation of the Iranians is the difference in the narrative. Betty reduces these Iranians to belonging to the Orient and they are all homogenized.

Due to the hostility between the countries, and the racist attacks on Moody at work and otherwise, Betty and Moody had to shift from their home in Corpus Christi, Texas to Alpena, Michigan. After the Hostage crisis people began to refer to Moody as 'Dr.Khomeini', he faced racial harassment at his workplace where educated people who were doctors worked. In Alpena as well when he lost a patient he thought it was due to his nationality that he lost his job. During both the instances, Betty was convinced Moody is at fault. From Alpena he had to shift to Detroit, Michigan in 1984. Betty paints a rosy picture of being in love and living a happy life when Moody was in Detroit however she does not account for the fact that Detroit had a long history of racial discrimination.

There were racial riots and the crime rate was the highest in Detroit in America during the 1980's. Detroit was often called the 'arson capital' or the 'murder capital' of America. In the year 1984 as well there were riots due the baseball world series. People were burning down their city for no apparent street. She does not take into account these instances before she creates the binaries of civilized/uncivilized, primitive/modern, east/west for Iran and America. She also does not take into account the changes that occurred like there were women movements and the rise of women directors in 1984. Women took up various vocations of the men due to the lack of men as they went to war with Iraq.

Despite the Orientalist way of representation her book was widely accepted. It was mainly due to this representation that it was accepted. Betty Mahmoody and her story are used as example and referred to in different areas ranging from International parenting law to marriage as well as domestic laws and discourses on women. Claudia Card was the Emma Goldman (WARF) Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, with

teaching affiliations in Women's Studies, Jewish Studies, Environmental Studies, and LGBT Studies.

She in her paper, 'Against Marriage and Motherhood' and in Joan Callahan's paper on 'Same-Sex Marriage: Why It Matters—At Least for Now' where Card is quoted she makes reference to Mahmoody as a chilling example of a woman married to an Iranian and is not allowed to leave the country without his permission. Card's main argument is against marriage which is, an unnecessary social requirement according her. She uses Betty Mahmoody's story to further her argument (Card).

Suzanne Miers in her paper 'Contemporary Forms of Slavery' which deals with Women's Human Rights Betty Mahmoody was used as a reference. The reference was made in the context of personal accounts on position of women in Muslim societies in Iran in the 1980's (Card). Betty Mahmoody was used as a reference by Julia Alanen in the paper 'When Human Rights Conflict: Mediating International Parental Kidnapping Disputes Involving the Domestic Violence Defense' which depicts laws related to custody of children when parents of two nationalities are involved (Alanen).

The paper by Merritt L. Mckeeon talks about the creation on the new law called International Parental Kidnapping Crime Act of 1993 (IPKCA). Betty Mahmoody's contributed to the formation of this law. She worked towards it by approaching the American Bar Association Family Law Section in 1992 and eloquently asked for help. The 'Review' by Michael Beard is about the Iranian stories that emerged after the revolution. He uses the term "post-Betty Mahmoody age" to show how the American perception of Iranian women is a dominant perception. It has shaped the writing of many women writer (Mckeeon 235-244).

Farzaneh Milani in her paper talks about the difference in prison narratives and hostage narratives. From this article it is gathered that *Not Without My Daughter* was perceived as a hostage narrative. It also talks about Representation of Iran and the marketing strategy for the book is stated, however, no comment is made on the same. The marketing strategy was to evoke sympathy for a mother in a hostile land. This article also substantiates how the novel as well as Betty Mahmoody was received. *Not Without My Daughter* sold some 12 million copies and was translated into more than 20 languages. Selected as a Literary Guild alternate, it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1987. The book turned its narrator into a national, and even international, celebrity. Mahmoody was celebrated by Oakland University in Michigan as Outstanding Woman of the Year and in Germany as Woman of the Year. Her alma mater, Alma College, also in Michigan, gave her an honorary doctorate (Milani 40-46).

All of this shows how widely Betty Mahmoody was received as a public figure and the novel was well received as well. The criticism that the adaptation of the novel had to face was not received by the novel. By answering the research questions listed at the outset, this paper shows that the socio-political scenario acted as a cover for Betty Mahmoody and the authenticity of her writing was not questioned. Her memoir was readily accepted by the society as it confirmed the stereotypes they held about Iran and justified their hostility towards the country and its people. The novel plays into stereotypes about Iranians thus creating the image for Americans. An American then symbolizes everything an Iranian is not. This is in accordance to Said's theory about creation of the 'Other' and the self.

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