On Women's Captivity in the Islamic World

By Farzaneh Milani (Source: Middle East Report)

In the unprecedented flourishing of writings about Islam in the United States in recent years, one category of books-life stories of women-has been the most popular, attracting the attention of politicians, publishers, the media and the reading public alike. In an old narrative frame of captivity recast for the present-day reader, some of these memoirs and autobiographies portray the Muslim woman as a virtual prisoner. She is the victim of an immobilizing faith, locked up inside her mandatory veil-a mobile prison shrunk to the size of her body.[1] She has no real voice or visibility, nowhere to escape to, no protection, no shelter, no freedom of movement. Captivity is her destiny.[2] Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the bestselling author of Infidel and The Caged Virgin who was named by Time in 2005 as one of the 100 people who shape our lives, sums up this mindset when she describes Islam as "a mental cage," a set of "mental bars," and Muslim women as "trapped in that cage."[3]

The figure of the trapped Muslim woman, which stands at the center of the ongoing national debate on Islam, contrasts sharply with her representation in medieval European literature, where mainly male writers depicted her as a queen or a princess, often larger than life. Tellingly, Don Quixote de La Mancha, first published in 1605 and considered by many to be the first modern novel, is also the stage for the arrival of a veiled Muslim woman in Western literature.[4]

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "harem," which came to be understood as a domestic penitentiary, an extension of the veil and its architectural double, entered the English language in 1634. Earlier, "seraglio," a derivative of the Persian word saray, meaning palace, was used for Muslim women's quarters. Demoted from a palace to a prison, the forbidden space was warded off as it seduced. It appalled as it lured. Simultaneously, it represented sexual abandon and incarceration.

The emergence of the Muslim woman as prisoner in Western literature coincided with a time when work spaces and living spaces were becoming more differentiated in Europe, and the ideology of a "public sphere" for men and a "private sphere" for women was gaining ascendancy. Even as more Western women found themselves thus constrained, the sex-segregated space of the harem symbolized an absolute loss of freedom of movement that appeared worse in comparison. Embellished with a certain charm and allure, the Muslim woman was invoked in order to demonstrate denial of civic freedom. She was an expression of the conflicts and ambivalences engendered by the processes of modernization, a projection perhaps of suppressed European self-doubt and self-criticism.

The recent spate of memoirs and autobiographies involving Muslim captors and their native or non-Muslim victims, a mutant category I call "hostage narratives," puts a new and fascinating twist on the familiar theme of women's captivity in the Islamic world. It is no longer mainly Western men who recount the tales of confinement, but women who recount them firsthand. This is no longer an image foisted upon women; rather, it is self-perception. It is authentic. It is women's own longing to escape, their own urgent plea to be liberated. The hostage narrative relies on the authority of personal experience, shares an insider's perspective and commands more trust and legitimacy. Written in English, addressing Americans directly and concerned with national and international security for good measure, this category of literature fetishizes the veil.[5]

Letters by the Thousand

The American reading public, the majority of which is made up of women, according to recent statistics, has an unquenchable appetite for books narrated by or about Muslim women. As soon as Sally Armstrong, then editor-in-chief of Homemaker's magazine and one of the first journalists to focus on women under the rule of the Taliban, published an article on the subject, she received more than 9,000 letters from concerned citizens who wanted to help, according to publicity materials for her 2002 book, Veiled Threat. In 2002 alone, more books were published in the US about Afghan women than in the entire history of American letters. They generated great sympathy among American readers. In contrast, memoirs of life in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, depicting the escalating violence, the institutionalization of corruption and the harsh living conditions for women, are rare.[6]

Afghan women under the oppressive rule of the Taliban swiftly became the symbol of oppression by Islam, their plight perfectly captured by the metaphor of the prisoner without a chance at parole or reprieve, without recourse to local justice. Ironically, the Taliban themselves had seized power in the name of Islam and in order to "protect" women. In fact, it was the kidnapping and rape of two women in 1994 that marked the dawn of the movement. The violated women symbolized an invaded motherland, and Afghan men became the emasculated sons who could not protect their mothers. Mourning the decline of the cherished ideals of honor and masculinity, Mullah Muhammad Omar, soon to become the shadowy leader of the Taliban, was a village preacher who claimed God directed him in a dream to save his country. He gathered some 30 like-minded men and 16 rifles, killed the rapists and vowed to shelter women. Thus was the Taliban movement born; the men's lost honor was restored, and women were "protected" by being placed under something close to house arrest.[7]

Women's captivity is now such an essential part of the dominant discourse on Islam that it shows up in unlikely places. Consider Phyllis Chesler's most recent book, The Death of Feminism (2005). More than four decades (and 12 books) after her trip to Afghanistan, the prolific author of the pioneering Women and Madness (1973) remembers that she was imprisoned there in the early 1960s. Chesler, who had presented Afghanistan in her earlier works as an exciting place, populated by kind and good-humored people, likens it now to Iran, "a country that has been described as a 'giant prison for women.'" She refers to her departure as an "escape."[8] The fourth chapter of the book begins with an arresting revelation: "On December 21, 1961, when I returned from my captivity in Afghanistan, I literally kissed the ground at Idlewild Airport."

The language and the plot of this chapter, titled "My Afghan Captivity," mark a distinctive shift in scenario, tone, style and point of view from earlier versions of the same trip. Although in the introduction to The Death of Feminism, Chesler states that she is writing about her "Afghan sojourn here at length for the first time," she had previously published at least two other full-length accounts of her experience as a young bride in a foreign land, first in a 1969 Mademoiselle magazine article titled "Memoirs of Afghanistan" and...
The "captivity" in Afghanistan is not only a delayed afterthought, a newsworthy postscript; it is, in Chesler's own words, "a cautionary tale." The author is quick to alert her readers to the serious dangers that Islam and the "primitive East" pose. "What happened to me in Afghanistan must also be taken as a cautionary tale of what can happen when one romanticizes the 'primitive East,'" she writes. "I had seen just how badly women are treated in the Islamic world. As a young bride, I had been mistreated, too—but I survived and got out. I hope that telling my story will help other Westerners understand and empathize with Muslim and Arab women (and men) who are being increasingly held hostage to barbarous and reactionary customs. And since Muslim women "are unlikely to oppose tyranny unless they are specially and persistently 'deprogrammed,'" they need to be "militarily and legally protected from domestic terrorism."

Although it is hard to miss the direct correlation established here between women's captivity and the need for foreign intervention, military or otherwise, to set them free, I do not presume to know the intentions or the agendas of various Westerners or any of the other authors I discuss in this essay. Nor do I wish to challenge the accounts of their incarceration, literal or figurative, exact or approximate, prolonged or short, recent or long ago. My objective here is to concentrate on the widespread appeal of prison literature, particularly as it is exemplified by the figure of the Muslim Woman. What is it about women's captivity in the Islamic world that catches immediate attention these days? How does it relate to social dramas unfolding within American society? What impact do these images of incarceration have on popular understandings of Islam in general and Muslim women in particular? Even if these life narratives were published as novels, as works of fiction, we would still need to ponder why the experience of captivity is so imperative, so key to the books' unfolding plots, so indispensable to their popularity.

Oft-Told Stories Never Told

Tales of captivity have, alas, become incorporated into our collective consciousness and literary imagination. Their large-scale publication is a byproduct of modernity and associated with the appearance of the prison as a form of punishment central to modern penal systems.[12] In book after book, in one anguished account after another, men and women from Eastern Europe to China and Africa, from the Middle East to Asia and America, have lamented a long list of atrocities and indignities suffered in captivity. They have described dark dungeons; brutal interrogations; forced confessions; public recantations; mental torments; muzzled voices; blindfolded eyes; maimed bodies. They have depicted massacres in secret jails and the brutalities of solitary confinement in terms as vivid as the recorded experiences of Russians detained in the Soviet gulag and Jews locked up in Nazi concentration camps.

There are also an increasing number of prison memoirs by Muslim men and women, even though the latter are, by and large, new to the enterprise (starting with Zaynah al-Ghazali in Egypt and Ashraf Dehghani in Iran). In recent years, however, more and more women, often religious, political and human rights activists, have written in candid detail about the pains and privations of living behind bars. Yearning for freedom and justice, they portray themselves as imbued with a spirit of survival, resistance, even hope. Far from being willing convicts, passive victims in need of special and persistent deprogramming from abroad, they succeed in tearing down walls, pushing against the boundaries that contain them, making frontiers vanish, bearing witness to the hitherto unspoken, sprouting wings, flying through their texts.

On the surface, women's prison memoirs and hostage narratives share certain commonalities. Born out of a desire to refuse erasure, both categories cathartically recount traumatic experiences and share personal tales of survival and liberation. Both genres present gripping tales, a form of protest against imposed stillness and invisibility. Underneath the seeming similarities, however, the two genres are as different as pomegranates and dates. While one is an eloquent testimony to women's agency, courage and defiance, the other trivializes or contradicts, in impact if not in intent, women's attempts at subversion, their forms of resistance and self-assertion. Whereas the former has its roots in women's increased, albeit contentious access to the public arena, to the world of politics and publishing and public discourse, the latter neglects their important and unprecedented presence in the public sphere. It focuses on prisons, but ignores prisoners and their memoirs.

Marina Nemat, author of the best-selling Prisoner of Tehran, who was forcibly married to a prison guard (and had to convert to Islam to do so), explains why she decided to write down her horrible memories after keeping silent for a quarter-century. "This is my way of paying back, because it is the story of political prisoners of Iran," she told Tavis Smiley of PBS in an interview aired in May 2007. "But this is a story that has never been told. Thousands of innocent people were killed in those prisons and nobody knows." Memoirs by female Iranian political prisoners, before and especially after the Islamic Revolution, are, in fact, numerous.[13]

Flashbacks of Trauma

Unlike prison memoirs, which are born out of an experience of incarceration, the genealogy of hostage narratives can be traced to a political event: the hostage crisis. It was on November 4, 1979, soon after the Islamic Revolution, when a group of militant students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran, and took 52 Americans hostage. To their delighted surprise, the hostage takers found themselves the object of infinite attention. Their images, alongside those of blindfolded Americans, were on the front pages of major newspapers, on the covers of leading magazines, on television screens, on T-shirts and banners and trees and walls and buildings. An indelible sense of anguish etched itself into the collective memory of a justifiably outraged nation. "America in Captivity" was the headline that summed up the mood of a country in psychic pain. Like harrowing flashbacks of a trauma, hostage taking became a recurrent theme in books and films and news clips about Iran and, by extension, the Islamic World.

A particularly transparent illustration of the hostage narrative can be found in Betty Mahmoody's 1987 memoir, Not Without My Daughter.[14] The plot is simple: The Mahmoody's idyllic life begins in America, where Betty meets Bozorg Mahmoody, an Iranian-born, American-educated physician. The couple marry and, for almost eight years, live a life of luxury. But this dream life quickly ends when husband and wife, accompanied by their daughter, Mahbou, 4, travel to Iran in August 1984. The two-week vacation quickly turns into an endless nightmare. The doting husband and devoted father metamorphoses into a selfish monster who locks up his wife and daughter against their wishes. Thus begins the perilous 18-month quest of mother and daughter to set themselves free. Bozorg Mahmoody, who responded to the accusations brought against him in a 2003 Finnish documentary titled "Without My Daughter," disputes Betty's account of these events.

Readers of Not Without My Daughter, this "true story of a desperate struggle to survive and to escape from an alien and frightening culture," are invited to participate emotionally in the drama. "Imagine yourself alone and vulnerable," urges the marketing blurb. "Imagine yourself...trapped by a husband you thought you trusted, and held prisoner in his native Iran, a land where women have no rights and Americans are despised." The word "hostage," as well as its various synonyms, appears frequently throughout the book. "Were Mahbo and I prisoners? Hostages? Captives of the venomous stranger who had once been a loving husband and father?" asks Betty Mahmoody initially. But soon she comes to recognize that she is not the only inmate in this prison-nation. All Iranian women are prisoners like her. "Now I realized anew that these women were caught in a trap just as surely as I, subject to the rules of a man's world, disgruntled but obedient."

Iran is not only a giant gulag, but also an evil nation. "For 18 months," Mahmoody writes, "I had been trapped in a country that, to me, had seemed populated almost totally with villains." And villains, as Isabel Allende reminds us in Paula, "are the most delicious
part of a story.”[15] One needs their presence to justify escaping from them, telling juicy tales about them, bombarding them. This evil country, this part of our history, our crassness and our captors, is simply beyond redemption. Even its own citizens think extinction would be its just desserts. Quoting her furious and despairing spouse, Mahmoody writes: “The only thing that could ever straighten out this screwed-up country is an atomic bomb! Wipe it off the map and start over.”[16] Twenty years before Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) would sing, “Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran,” to the old Beach Boys tune “Barbara Ann,” the idea was proposed in the most popular book ever published in the US about Iran.

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. Sally Fields acted in the movie adaptation. And 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.

The Dank, Dark Cell

We need not entertain any illusions about the Islamic Republic of Iran. Repression, autocracy, political and religious purges, censorship, and gender inequity are facts of contemporary life. They should be written about, both inside and outside the country, as indeed they have been. But Iran is not a lyrical dystopia. It is a real country with real people. It is also a land of paradoxes, a society in transition. Conditions shift and alter radically from one day to the next. Nothing is exactly as it seems or what it was just a while ago. And surely no one can accuse the Islamic Republic of intolerance toward its own contradictions, particularly when it comes to the treatment of women. Indeed, two competing narratives of womanhood exist side by side in Iran today. Iranian women can vote and run for some of the highest offices in the country, but must observe an obligatory dress code. They can drive personal vehicles, even taxis and trucks and fire engines, but cannot ride bicycles. They are seated away from men in the back of buses, but can be squashed in between perfect male strangers in overcrowded jinney taxis. They have entered the world stage as Nobel Peace Laureates, human rights activists, best-selling authors, prize-winning film directors and Oscar nominees, but cannot enter government offices through the same door as men. It is this complex mixture of protest and accommodation, of resistance and acquiescence, that reflects most accurately a woman's life in Iran today.

Yet only one side of this ongoing battle, that which reflects a static image of victimhood, dominates America’s imagination and most of its bestsellers. Take Azar Nafisi’s highly acclaimed memoir Reading Lolita in Tehran, canonized by First Lady Laura Bush, alongside such world classics as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Brothers Karamazov, Jane Eyre, War and Peace and The Little Prince, in her list of “25 books to read before you're 25.”[17] This is the story of seven “girls” and their teacher, caught in “someone else's dream.” Like Chesler and Mahmoody, Nafisi depicts Iran as an open-air detention facility and equates all Iranian women with Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, “the little entrapped mistress” of Humbert Humbert, “her rapist and jailer.” They are resigned prisoners of a “stern ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher-king,” who has confiscated not only their rights, but also their identities. Here in this vast prison, women are defined by their imprisonment, just as “Lolita’s image is forever associated in the minds of the readers with that of her jailer,” having “no meaning” on its own and only coming “to life through her prison bars.”

Captivity is the central metaphor of Nafisi’s memoir. It appears in a wide variety of contexts. In a passage reminiscent of Mahmoody’s sense of entrapment in Iran, the author/narrator writes, “I had started having nightmares and sometimes woke up screaming, mainly because I felt I would never again be able to leave the country.” Even when she does leave and travel abroad (and she does so repeatedly), she still feels suffocated. She confides in her students “about waking up at night feeling as if I were choking, as if I would never be able to get out, about the dizzy spells and nausea and pacing around the apartment at all hours of the night.”

Captivity, coping with and escaping from it, is also the primary theme of the Western literature class that is the main subject of Reading Lolita in Tehran. “I formulated certain general questions for them to consider, the most central of which was how can these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women.” To further clarify the mission of the class, Nafisi notes, “We were not looking for blueprints, for an easy solution, but we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to.” Her hope finds fulfillment. Here is how one of the students describes her emotions as she enters the classroom: “Mitra began to tell us how she felt as she climbed up the stairs every Thursday morning. She said that step by step she could feel herself gradually leaving reality behind her, leaving the dark, dank cell she lived in to surface for a few hours into open air and sunshine. Then, when it was over, she returned to her cell.”[18] If Iran is the prison, “the dark, dank cell,” then the road to lasting freedom is through departure and flight.[19] Another student captures this message in a nutshell: “You set up a model for us that staying here is useless, that we should all leave if we want to make something of ourselves.”

Americanization

In a review essay on books about Iran, Patrick Clawson writes, “And what becomes established in the Western mind as the realities about Iran may not bear any resemblance to what careful scholarship demonstrates. Therefore, a good rule of thumb for learning about Iran is to read the obscure scholarly books and ignore anything that sells well.”[20] Academic circles, like Clawson, view specialists with some disdain. As Leslie Schunk writes: “It is symptomatic of our times that many of us serious readers are not encouraged but, to the contrary, are put off by learning a book has won a Pulitzer Prize...and/or is a popular book club selection and/or has been on the New York Times list of bestsellers for 110 weeks.”[21] But, of course, popular books wield great power by touching the hearts and souls of Americans, especially at a time when the stories they believe in can become guidelines for the country’s foreign policy. The authors of hostage narratives speak to massive audiences, not only through their books, but also via radio and television interviews, articles and highly advertised, well-attended lectures and the publicly attending prestigious awards.

It is ironic that these depictions of Muslim women as prisoners for life should be so popular in the United States, when one considers that the "Land of the Free” imprisons three times more women than any other nation. Thanks to the staggering boom of incarceration during the last two decades, in fact, the US is now the world's number one jailer, with over 2.2 million people behind bars. As a 2006 report from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency put it, "The US has less than 5 percent of the world's population, but over 23 percent of the world's incarcerated people.”[22] Given these figures, which have attracted little attention, to be sure, one wonders if the interest in Muslim women's supposed lifetime imprisonment is a denial or a projection of a harsh American reality.

Does the hostage narrative titillate and comfort? Does it make the massive US penal system seem normal and necessary? Perhaps, but there are undoubtedly several other factors at play in the popular appeal of hostage narratives. They spin engaging and suspenseful yarns, replete with love, betrayal and intrigue, and the extra spice of raids, bombings and executions. They alleviate the anxieties of their time by reflecting them; reaffirm the values of society by meditating on their loss; validate subtle and not so subtle stereotypes and misperceptions. Most importantly, they reel in the unsuspecting reader with a number of rhetorical devices and literary strategies that, in effect, Americanize the stories.

Indeed, the hostage narrative is highly reminiscent of an indigenous literary genre, the captivity narrative, which was popular from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. The plot in such books was often a simple series of reversals. The protagonist, usually a
woman, was nabbed by Native Americans, who took her from her life of comfort and freedom into harsh confinement and rough living. She faced adversity with unusual courage and resolve. In the end, the forces of good won out, and the victim returned home to tell her tale of survival, which was all the more riveting for being true.

Today, autobiographies, memoirs and travelogues are some of the most popular kinds of books published in the United States. Self-narration, it seems, is an acknowledged right, a favorite American pastime. Even those who do not wish to write a book about their lives make personal statements on bumper stickers and license plates; they tattoo them on their bodies; they reveal their lives on talk shows or webcams linked to Internet sites such as YouTube and Facebook; they participate in and eagerly watch reality TV; they bare their souls for mass consumption.

Public confessions of misfortune and hard-earned redemption, even coming from characters with ambiguous moral or legal status, seem to fascinate Americans. The more unbearable the suffering, the better the sales; the more sordid or horrific the experience, the greater the potential for commercial success. Consider James Frey's calculated announcement in the first line of A Million Little Pieces: "I am an Alcoholic and I am a drug addict and I am a Criminal." Frey could not publish his story as a novel. Seventeen different publishers rejected his manuscript. Astonishingly, however, when he labeled it a "memoir," abracadabra, it was picked up by a premier publishing house, Doubleday. As "non-fiction," it sold millions of copies and was praised for its openness and candor.

Three years later, and only after the veracity of some sections was questioned, Frey admitted to having embellished some of his personal experiences and to having fabricated others. Only 18 out of 432 pages of the book are in dispute, he told Larry King. "This is an appropriate ratio for a memoir," he thought. Kathryn Harrison has a point when she writes, "We love stories of overcoming hardship; really, the only way to improve on them is to multiply the hero's woes."[23]

The real appeal of hostage narratives, however, is the hunger of the American reading public for detailed and accessible information about the Islamic world, in particular that which claims to transcend partisan politics and go beyond the headlines. So, what is there to read?

Although the number of books published in the US has increased steadily, the $25 billion publishing industry is dominated by a few conglomerates driven by an obsession with blockbusters. The not so lucrative business of translation from other languages into English, a cornerstone of intercultural communication and better understanding among nations, has no real place in such a market.[24] The number of translations, regardless of genre, has dropped steeply in the last two decades. According to a study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, of the 12,828 books of fiction and poetry published in the United States in 1999, only 297 (2.3 percent) were literary translations. Of these, 72 percent were from Western and Eastern Europe. Only 18 translated titles were of Middle Eastern origin.[25] In 2004, after the September 11 attacks had stimulated Americans' interest in the perspectives of others, a scant 2.62 percent of all books published were translated from other languages. By comparison, 29 percent of all books published in the Czech Republic and 25 percent in Spain were works of translation.[26] And in Iran, of a total of 38,546 books published in the country in 2004, 8,976 or 23 percent were translated books, a ratio consistent with the previous years.[27]

The conversation between the reading public in the United States and the rest of the world has become more like a monologue.

This is why Maryam, the Iranian-American protagonist of Anne Tyler's novel, Digging to America, regrets that "Americans read only American literature."[28] On the face of it, her statement seems implausible, especially given all the mixing and interdependence entailed in globalization. Strictly speaking, it is not even true. For starters, Maryam's compatriot, Jalal al-Din Rumi, has been a best-selling poet in America for the past two decades, as attractive or meaningful to Americans as Walt Whitman or Shakespeare in terms of the number of books sold.[29] Some 700 years after his death, the Muslim mystic continues to mesmerize American readers with his message of love and religious tolerance. Elsewhere, in the US academy, an avalanche of books and articles about Muslim societies are produced in several disciplines and from a variety of perspectives. Yet-and this is where Maryam has a point-poets, academics and the small number of translated books reach a limited readership, while popular books wind up in the hands of millions.

Necessary Distinctions

Scholarship, indeed, has become something of a liability. When Hirsí Ali tells her mentor, the prominent Dutch politician Neelie Kroes, that she plans to move to the United States to pursue a doctorate, she is swiftly dissuaded from doing so. Why? "Neelie said my dreams of academia were like a sinkhole; they would never go anywhere. No matter how wonderful a Ph.D. thesis I wrote, it would disappear into a file drawer. It would never shift the lives of Muslim women by an inch."[30] Clearly, Kroes, the politician, knew the marketplace well. In less than two years, Hirsí Ali turned her anecdotal tale into what passed for two authoritative studies of Islam and Muslim women and two international sensations. Angrily, she also decried "infuriatingly stupid analysts-especially those who called themselves Arabists, yet seemed to know next to nothing about the reality of the Islamic world."[31]

In his 2005 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Harold Pinter said: "In 1958 I wrote the following: 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.' I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art." As a writer, Pinter said, he stands by his earlier judgment. "But as a citizen," he cannot. "As a citizen, I must ask: What is true? What is false? We live in times that, use Pinter's terms, call upon ordinary citizens to pay unusual attention to the truth and falsehood of what they are told. But these are times, as in Pinter's case, that call upon the artist as citizen, or the citizen in the artist, to carry an even heavier burden in determining what is true and what is false.

As citizens of an increasingly polarized world, we, the readers, cannot afford to suspend critical judgment and accept as fact deliberate manipulation of lives and histories. We need to question the distortions of truth, the betrayals of history, the berating of scholarship, the politics of publishing and image making. We need to examine the seductiveness and political function of Muslim women's tales of captivity, sustained and supported by official power, recognized by the media, authenticated by hostage narratives.

Should we diversify our pool of information and pay closer attention to a competing narrative of the Muslim Woman, one which is not trapped in tales of her unending captivity, one which will only gain vigor and currency when more facts about her world become known, then far from being the "captive" she is portrayed to be, she would be recognized as a moderating, modernizing force, a seasoned negotiator of confined spaces, a veteran trespasser of boundaries, walls, fences, cages, blind windows, closed doors and iron gates.

Author's Note: This essay is an excerpt from a chapter of my forthcoming book, Remapping the Cultural Geography of Iran: Islam, Women and Freedom of Movement. During the last four years, I have presented the concept of hostage narratives in several talks, symposia and roundtables (at New York University, Simon Fraser University, Washington and Lee University, the University of Chicago, Bennington College, Stanford University, the University of Texas-Austin and Oxford University, among other places) and benefited enormously from the questions, suggestions and challenges of colleagues and participants.
Endnotes

[1] Women's clothing, regardless of country or faith, has often constrained mobility. Remarkably, it has been easier to see and criticize the oppressive and immobilizing fashion of others than of self. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who traveled to Turkey in 1716, recounts how harems women viewed her attire as a true prison. Invited to a Turkish bath, Lady Mary's undressing attracts animated surprise. "Come hither and see how cruelly the poor English ladies are used by their husbands," screams the lady of the house. 'You need boast indeed of the superior liberties allowed you, when they lock you thus up in a box.'" Lord E. Wharnecliffe, ed., The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, vol. 1 (London: 1887), p. 247.

[2] "Captivity" is also a trendy component of book titles. See, in addition to the books treated in this essay, Aza Riapeiour, Tall Walls: From Palace to Prison (1998); Danya Curry, Heather Mercer and Stacy Mattingly, Prisoners of Hope: The Story of Our Captivity and Freedom in Afghanistan (2002); Mary Quin, Kidnapped in Yemen: One Woman's Amazing Escape from Captivity (2005)—only some of the titles published in the US in the past decade. Some of these books are about Western women held captive in the Muslim world and as such they fall in a different category. My intention here is to focus on the allure of captivity as a catchword in titles.


[5] The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi writes: "The French and German publishers of my books always insist on having the word 'harem' on the cover and a photo of a veiled woman. When I protest, they tell me that this makes it sell better, even if the contents of the book contradict this image. It is time to unveil women on the covers of books that sell in the West." Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992), p. 187, fn 10.


[10] Phyllis Chesler, The Death of Feminism (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005), p. 20. Later, on p. 81, Chesler writes that Afghanistan is a "prison, a police state, a feudal monarchy, a theocracy, rank with fear and paranoia."


[16] Judge Patrick Reed Joslyn, who presided over the divorce and custody hearings of the Mahmoodys, also had a prescription of death and destruction. In the Finnish documentary chronicling the husband's version of the story, the judge announces that, "If I were in charge of the country, there'd be a lot of dead Iranians."

[17] Ironically enough, Nabokov's masterpiece, Lolita, the very book that lent Nafisi her title, does not appear on this illustrous list.

[18] Many other woman narrators express this feeling of imprisonment. In My Forbidden Face, Latifa writes: "I can't think of anything to do. Sometimes I wander around my home like a convict taking a tour of her cell."

[19] In PEN's inaugural Arthur Miller Freedom to Write Memorial Lecture, Orhan Pamuk said, "As for those who emigrate from these poor countries to the West or the North to escape economic hardship and brutal repression as we know, they sometimes find themselves further brutalized by the racism they encounter in rich countries. Yes, we must also be alert to those who denigrate immigrants and minorities for their religion, their ethnic roots or the oppression that the governments of the countries they've left behind have visited on their own people." Freedom to Write, New York Review of Books, May 25, 2006.


[27] In 1998, 27 percent of a total of 15,960 books published in Iran were translated books. In 1999, the ratio was 24 percent of 20,642; in 2000, 18 percent of 23,305; in 2001, 18 percent of 30,885; in 2002, 23 percent of 32,801; and in 2003, 23 percent of 34,462. See the relevant volumes of Karnameh-e nashr: fehrest-e mozoee ketabhay montasher shodeh [Publishing Index: A Thematic List of Published Books] (Tehran: Khaneh Ketab).


[29] Some of the most popular American translators of Rumi cannot read him in the original Persian. They use earlier translations of Rumi for what can perhaps be called translations of translations.


[31] Ibid., p. 270.
The girl was among hundreds of women and girls from the Yazidi religious minority captured by Islamic State fighters in early August when the militants overran her hometown of Sinjar in northwestern Iraq. Hundreds were killed in the attack, and tens of thousands fled for their lives, most to the Kurdish-held parts of northern Iraq. Iraq's Human Rights Ministry said at the time that hundreds of women were abducted by the militants, who consider the Yazidis a heretical sect. The Associated Press spoke to the girl and several other young women who escaped captivity by the Islamic State group.

Souhayla, 16, lies on her side on a mattress on the floor, unable to hold up her head. Her uncle props her up to drink water, but she can barely swallow. Her voice is so weak, he places his ear directly over her mouth to hear her. The girl walked out of the most destroyed section of Mosul this month, freed after three years of captivity and serial rape when her Islamic State captor was killed in an airstrike. Her uncle described her condition as "shock." He had invited reporters to her bedside so they could document what the terror group's system of se