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Maria D. Wagenknecht, *Constructing Identity in Iranian-American Self-Narrative*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 221 pp., \$95.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781137479617.

As the literature of the Iranian diaspora and Iranian Americans has expanded exponentially in the past decade, so too has the scholarship about it. The trend in publishing memoirs in the US (or self-narrative as many scholars have now labeled it) began shortly before the start of the twenty-first century, when the first of many memoirs by Iranian-born or Iranian-American women were published. The climate for publishing books that revealed the private lives of Iranian women, often through the lens of patriarchal and political oppression, to Western and American readers, was often driven by a fascination with the idea of “unveiling” (a now tired and overused trope). But it was also driven by a shortage of stories about the real lives of Iranians, and the invisible stories of Iranians cast in the net of politics and history that mitigated their departure from Iran in the first place. The scholarship on books like Marjan Satrapi’s *Persepolis* or Tara Bahrapour’s *To See and See Again* captured in critical terms the complex experiences of Iranians, and women in particular, as immigrants, exiles, and dual-nationals who straddle the cracks of history that cause people to live in between cultures.

This scholarship has also given birth to an entire field of study under the subcategory of Iranian Studies, which many refer to as “Iranian Diaspora Studies.” Among the many special issues of journals, articles, and PhD dissertations, we now have a unique and important intervention about the role and importance of literature in the Iranian diaspora context. Among the books that have emerged from PhD research about the Iranian-American memoir trend is Maria D. Wagenknecht’s *Constructing Identity in Iranian-American Self-Narrative*. Wagenknecht’s dissertation—and unfortunately it does read like a dissertation—is not the first, and most certainly won’t be the last of these critical studies. Shortly after the publication of Wagenknecht’s book, Nima Naghibi’s *Women Write Iran: Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora* was published from the University of Minnesota Press and expands this scholarship. Wagenknecht received her PhD from the University of Rostock, Germany and is currently an independent researcher.

Wagenknecht’s book provides some predictable, albeit useful, frames for understanding this explosion in “self-narrative” and in essence interprets some of these narratives to capture the “identity” thread of this writing. In Part I of the book, “Troubled Heritage: History and Religion in the Diasporic Reconstruction,” Wagenknecht situates the departure of large numbers of Iranians after the Iranian Revolution within what she calls “narratives of victimicy.” Adopting American Psychologist Jerome Bruner’s term “victimicy,”

Wagenknecht writes, “Iranian-American autobiographers cannot attribute their departure to their own volition, as the guilt of leaving one’s home country in times of distress is considerable and can lead to questions of legitimacy regarding identity” (24). This statement, which is rather unclear and facile, about first generation memoirists leads her to what she says is her argument that “they construct their narratives to show that their departure was forced—by discrimination, misogyny, and oppressive traditionalism” (24). The terms misogyny and victimity are troubling (if not very current) for scholarship that has long since evolved. Her attempt to categorize writers through this “victimity narrative” leads Wagenknecht to a overly generalized readings of writers like Azar Nafisi, Nahid Rachlin, Farideh Goldin, Roya Hakakian, and Abbas Milani and erases their differences and provides what are considerably simplistic readings of very different strategies of self-writing. In her attempt to unify these writers under the category of victimity, she, for example, labels writers under the banner of “Traditionalism and Patriarchy.” She begins this section thus:

Detailed descriptions of the traditionalism prevailing in Iran’s society—and the misogyny that comes with it—loom large in accounts of first generation Iranian Americans. In this chapter, I could have focused on misogyny alone, but I am wary of oversimplifying the matter as both men and women authors tell tales of victimity intricately entangled with descriptions of traditionalism. (33)

The fact is, Wagenknecht does exactly that: she oversimplifies. In this same chapter where she analyzes “victimity narratives” she equates patriarchal oppression with descriptions of the authors’ fathers without attention to, for example, the varying political and personal circumstances of each author based on class, age, or time period in Iranian history. Azar Nafisi’s departure from Iran is almost three decades after Nahid Rachlin’s, and to simply attribute each of their narratives to victimity is to erase the author’s agency. Wagenknecht’s analysis is slim on theoretical scholarship, especially literary theory. Her interpretations of this literature often fall short and reinforce aspects of what we have come to expect from “orientalist” scholarship. Her readings of these writers are often very Western-centric and un-nuanced—as if she herself is very outside of Iranian culture trying to make sense of it through these texts; a slippery slope that can’t help but create an othering effect in the scholarship itself. Wagenknecht’s inattention to the way literary scholarship now makes distinctions between autobiography, self-writing, memoir, and the different modes in which the varying authors she elects to write on, is a troubling.

Wagenknecht’s book does what the emerging scholarship of the Iranian diaspora seeks to avoid: falling into the rigid binaries that assign value to East and West (Iran or the US), or that posit agency and movement through a singular lens, often through the salvation of Western individualism against the dark civilizational “other.” In a later chapter in her book, titled, “Relative Identities: The Iranian-American Self in Its Relation to Others,” Wagenknecht writes that she will “show here that Iranian-American autobiographers construct themselves to exist between opposing cultural forces that either pull them toward individuality or relationally” (169). Wagenknecht uses the word “relationally” to indicate group identities and continues to generalize in the same paragraph with the following statement: “They recount having been fascinated previous to migration with what they perceive as Western individuality, with being a single body—yet postmigration, Iranian emigrants experience nostalgia regarding closeness between bodies, which they find wanting in America” (169). Not only is this statement unclear, but it homogenizes all Iranian-

Americans and Iranian-America authors of “self-writing” (169). Wagenknecht’s book falls short of its title and, unfortunately, reads like a dissertation that lacks attention to theory, attention to work in the field, and operates from paradigms that many Iranian-American writers and scholars of the Iranian diaspora would find weak and outdated. This book is replete with sentences that are difficult to follow. What one wonders is how Palgrave Macmillan decided to publish a book so desperately in need of peer reviews and serious editing. Fortunately, the field of Iranian Diaspora Studies has opened up considerably and a number of promising young scholars working in this field of literature, self-narrative, and transnational Iranian cultural studies, will soon be publishing much more polished dissertations that add to and advance the field.

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