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Local Stories, Global Audiences: Transformation of Iranian Narratives in a Digital Age

Abstract

This article examines the production of digital media content from Iran, especially post-2009 elections, and highlights how it has offered a space where local narratives, particularly those that could not be told due to local restrictions and censorships, are reaching digital global audiences. It examines how these previously unheard voices have become contested spaces for shifting and creating new interests in stories that have the power to change popular beliefs about Iran and Iranian society.

Keywords

Iran, diasporic literature, Iranian writing, cultural identity, world literatures in English, Iranian elections.

Iran and Digital Media

By drawing on Iran and Iranian people's use of digital platforms, this article focuses on how, in the last decade or so, digital media has offered a space through which local narratives, particularly those that could not be told in their local settings due to restrictions and censorships, are reaching digital global audiences. It examines how these have become contested spaces through which local narratives are being told, and how they are shifting and creating new interests in marginal and local stories that have the power to change popular and hegemonic beliefs about Iran and the Iranian society and population at large. Given Iran and the Iranian people's vast engagement with the digital realm, the study of various aspects of which have been the topics of numerous books, this article examines only elements of the English content produced by the members of the Iranian diaspora. It traces the link between how local narratives from Iran, presented through social media platforms after 2009, have led to the rise of new kinds of interests and modes of representations of extended narratives of current and local stories within a global context. Then it highlights the link between social media and digital platforms of publication as a space through which these alternative and new

narratives can be recounted. This article examines how digital platforms of publication, especially self-publications—free from censorships within Iran and the publishing and editorial gatekeepers in the West—are accommodating for the expansion and full expression of significantly different, marginal, current, and local narratives from Iran.

Social Media Revolution

On the twelfth of June 2009, Iranians went to the polls to elect a new president. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected by a 63 per cent majority, millions believed that their votes had not been counted. This led to massive uprisings across the country. The government lashed back at the protestors violently. Thousands were arrested and hundreds killed. When the Iranian media censored what was happening, people took the coverage of the protests into their own hands. As the events unfolded, many recorded them on their phones, immediately sharing them through social media outlets. While the Iranian government had held a tight clamp on foreign journalists reporting from there at the time, it was the ordinary citizen's recordings of the events and sharing of them on social media that began to immediately reach a global and digital audience. As the world watched, citizens from inside Iran posted photos, videos and reports on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter of the protests and bloodshed as it was taking place. One of the most controversial of these posts that caught the world's attention was the death of a young protestor—Neda Agha Sultan—on camera after she was mysteriously shot in a crowd.

Given the level of governmental censorship, it was only thanks to the viability of social media that this local situation was given a huge amount of global attention. As Negar Mottahedeh argues, "Images of the spectacular crowds in green and the viral video of the murdered Neda Agha-Soltan galvanized people of all backgrounds and ages" (4). The world was then suddenly fascinated by what was going on locally in Iran. Soon, the Iranian election became one of the biggest digital and online stories of recent history. As Mottahedeh reports in her 2015 book *#Iranianelection*, "with more than ten thousand #iranelection tweets an hour throughout the month of June [2009], the involvement of netizens in the crisis in Iran was so widespread that the hashtag #iranelection remained the highest-ranking global hashtag on Twitter for two weeks following the presidential election, dropping only momentarily after the unexpected death of Michael Jackson" (7). Consequently, it has been argued that "the 2009 election was a watershed moment in illustrating the sociopolitical impact of new media" (Rafizadeh and Alimardani). So significant was the Iranian engagement with social media during the 2009 elections, that it has been said, "the so-called 'Iranian Twitter Revolution' was

a revolution for Twitter – not necessarily for Iran" (Nemati).

Yet, this was not only a revolution for the Internet. At the same time, this was a revolution of how social media was used in Iran to breach local censorships and also to change the global perspective about Iran. When the protests broke out, the Iranian government was quick to cover them up. The local media did not do any justice to representing the reality and extent of it. As Mottahedeh puts it "despite the presence of hundreds of thousands of protestors in the streets, state radio and television persisted in covering up the protests. Not only was state television refusing to report on the uprising; it was broadcasting lies about the discrepancies in the election results, and running sitcoms and miniseries to create a lull in the citizenry" (12). In the face of near absences of reports on the protests, social media became one of the only ways that even the locals began to understand the true nature of events. Thus social media provided a dual platform of expression, one that reached local audiences with local stories that were being censored, and at the same time one that broadcasted these stories to a global audience.

This created another kind of revolution: the way Iran was seen in the West. Until about then Iran had been still relatively mysterious and rather inaccessible to the Western audiences and only those who were interested and went looking for information knew of the reality of life there. This new kind of representation changed the way Iran was perceived. In order to understand the significance of digital platforms in the way they revolutionised Iran's presence in the world, however, we need to first have an understanding of Iran's recent socio-political and historical position within a world context after the Islamic revolution, as well as the usage of these digital platforms within and beyond Iran.

Although Iran was a country with relatively open political and international relations with the Western world prior to the Islamic revolution of 1979, this changed soon after the Islamic government settled in and began to operate on a belief that "the Western powers were rapacious imperialists determined to exploit Iran's wealth for their self-aggrandizement" (Takeyh 17). But, things began to change leading to a shift in Iran's international relations. In light of clear anti-Western attitudes, particularly after the hostage crisis when a number of Americans were taken hostage for 444 days at their embassy in Tehran, and with severe restrictions on people's private and social movements, including on women's dress codes and rights, and following a bloody eight-year war with Iraq, Iran became a nation almost completely inaccessible to the Western world. The 1980s, as Ray Takeyh argues, was "the apogee of the revolutionary activism" (2), where Khomeini had "a beleaguered state at odds

with most of the international community" (3). With almost no foreign journalists, media, and tourists allowed to enter the country during the 1980s and early 1990s, Iran began to become a mystery to the Western world. The inaccessibility of the country, coupled with resonances of exotic Orientalist narratives, created what Jasmin Darznik says was "an insatiable curiosity for both the intimate details of … lives [of Iranians] and descriptions of forbidden landscapes" (57).

With hardly any direct reports or accounts coming out of Iran during that time, there was an interest in narratives of what life was like inside Iran. There was particularly an appetite for women's stories, as told by those who had lived there and left after the revolution had gelled. This, as I examine elsewhere,[1] has been the period that has led to the beginnings of a new kind of literature by the diasporic Iranian community. Told at the height of Iran's inaccessibility and the cusp of the revolution and the still ongoing Western hostility towards Iran after the hostage crisis, these accounts often recounted the conditions of life in Iran, especially for women, under the Islamic regime. These few narratives, which included Sousan Azadi's *Out of Iran: One Woman's Escape from the Ayatollahs* (1987), and Cherry Mosteshar's *Unveiled: Love and Death Among the Ayatollahs* (1995), were mostly autobiographical accounts, often written with the assistance of a ghost writer and were published eagerly in large numbers by well-known Western publishing houses.[2] As the only accounts that told of life in Iran during this time, they were reprinted and hit the best-seller list. Given the extreme inaccessibility of Iran during the 80s and most of the 90s, these very few printed accounts were one of the only means by which Western audiences could glimpse into the lives of a few locals in Iran.

Such accounts continued to appear in books by the diasporic Iranian community well into the 1990s and even early 2000s. They increased dramatically in number particularly after the events of 9/11 when Iranian women's stories gained special interest. However, although they offered a glimpse of life in Iran, they were narratives of those who had left Iran a good

[1] I examine the emergence and history of diasporic Iranian literature in English in my book *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora: Meaning and Identity since the Islamic Revolution* (2015)

[2] Another key text that must mentioned here which has had a great influence in the way Iran was perceived in the 1980s is Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* (1987). A bestselling book, it tells the story of American born Betty, who marries an Iranian man and travels to Iran, only to be kept hostage by her husband and his family, at the height of the war, eventually having to escape with her daughter through the mountains. As one of the few accounts told from an American perspective, this book has been seminal in the way Iran was—unfortunately, mostly negatively—perceived during this period of time.

while before the publications of their work. They were not a projection of what life in Iran in the time the books were being published. They were inherently delayed narratives depicting life before and during the Iranian Revolution. Yet, given the still relative inaccessibility of Iran, these accounts continued to be read as reflections of modern Iran despite the many changes that had taken place.

However, the landscape of narratives emerging from Iran began to gradually change with the advent of the Internet in the early 1990s.[3] With access to the Internet, various social and political groups found at their disposal a new, then relatively uncensored, network through which to express their discontent and views to mass audiences. This new accessibility according to the "Iran Media Program," lead "to one of the most vibrant 'webs' in the world," where between 2001 and 2009, an estimated "200,000 to 700,000 Iranian blogs and websites were created, leading some scholars to refer to Iran as 'Blogistan'" (Rafizadeh and Alimardani). However, at this time, the stories emerging from Iran were almost entirely in Persian, and only targeted at Persian readers in Iran and across the globe.

The Iranian population's engagement with the Internet continued to evolve with its changing shape. Despite the severe censorship imposed on Iran's Internet users, the Iranian population has continued to bypass censorship through highly advanced anti-filtering methods and maintained an active online presence. With the advent of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter and YouTube, the Iranian population has tapped into the resources offered by these mass medias of communication too, so that, as Niki Akhavan argues, "by late 2007, the sheen of blogs and blogging was beginning to dull on the Iranian Internet, and social networking sites were showing signs of becoming more popular among resident and Diaspora Iranians" (9).

The Iranian engagement with social media reached its climax with the Presidential elections in 2009. As Akhavan argues, "from producing and participating in one of the most vibrant blogspheres during the early days of Web 2.0 to capturing and disseminating audiovisual content during the massive demonstrations following the June 2009 presidential election, Iranians have established a place online and have captured international attention in doing so" (5). The bombardment of social media with images of Iran revolutionised the way

[3] According to research posted on Iran Media Program, Iran was one of the pioneer countries in the Middle East to adapt the internet, with the first connections going into place in 1993 through Sharif and Guilan Universities before expanding into the domestic and residential use.

Iran was seen internationally, and brought it to global attention. These images told a totally different story to those of the Western imagination regarding Iran and the Iranian people. It began to project a new kind of understanding about life there on a global scale.

In this representation, Iranian women were no longer silent, passive and servile as traditionally believed and represented by some of the outdated literature. Rather, they could be seen shouting alongside men in opposition to the government. As the world witnessed through these clips, women such as Neda Agha Soltan, suffered the violation of their human rights at the hands of the Islamic government alongside men. For the first time since the hostage crisis, the world began to distinguish between the Iranian people and its government. Here, not all Iranians were anti-Western and anti-American as it was previously believed after the events of the hostage crisis. For the first time it was also made clear how much the Iranian youth disagreed with the existing government and its policies. Furthermore, it brought some serious human rights issues and problems in Iran to the attention of the world, which would have been easy for the Iranian government to deny before they were circulated on the Internet. As Akhavan observes, "'protestors' much-touted uses of social media in the aftermath of the disputed election remain a hallmark example of how these platforms can successfully attract transnational attention and support" (10). This kind of representation not only shifted how Iran and Iranians were seen across the world, but also brought with it a new interest in the kinds of narratives that were being told from Iran.

Revolutionary Narratives of Now

Out of the ashes of these protests, and thanks to the digital platforms of communication which had brought these issues to world attention, a new interest was born in narratives emerging from Iran. Global audiences were no longer interested in delayed narratives by silenced and oppressed diasporic women. Rather, as the result of the news coming out from Iran through unmissable social media feeds, people wanted to hear stories about what was happening locally in contemporary Iran. Soon this was reflected in the kinds of narratives that were being published and circulated in the West about Iran. There was now an interest in the stories of the generations of men and women who had lived silently under the Islamic regime for the last several decades and whose lives were affected by the 2009 elections and their aftermath.

While up till then there had been some narratives about what was happening in Iran, they had been mostly told by those who lived abroad and returned to Iran, often after a length of absence. Often, these stories carried with them a sense of nostalgia or alienation associated

with return diasporic narratives and memoirs, or they told of the injustices of the Iranian regime from the perspective of Western educated returnees. For instance, Azadeh Moaveni's memoir *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) recalls her return to Iran as the child of Iranian parents born in California, and her travels to Iran to gain a sense of perspective. Others such as Haleh Esfandiari's *My Prison My Home* (2009), and Roxanna Saberi's *Between Two Worlds* (2010), tell of their respective imprisonments in Iran upon their return as scholars and journalists. By the very nature of their authors' occupation of an "insider-outsider" position, these narratives could only scratch the surface of what was really going on in Iran.

However, after the 2009 elections and the increasing awareness of what was going on in Iran, new narratives began to emerge that were told from the point of views of those living *inside* Iran and directly affected by the immediate situation. The publishing businesses knew that these were the kinds of narratives that would interest readers who had gained a glimpse into what was going on through their Facebook and Twitter feeds. It took only several months from the protests for new books with these themes to hit the shelves. Just to name a few, for instance, Random House published a novella by someone with the pseudonym Afsaneh Mogadam in May 2010 by the name *Death to the Dictator!: A Young Man Casts a Vote in Iran's 2009 Elections and Pays a Devastating Price,* which daringly takes us inside the events, and tells of the horrors, the rapes and the threats that were endured by young protestors. Similarly, Arash Hejazi, the man who filmed Neda's death and circulate it on YouTube, and soon after fled Iran for his life, published the accounts in *Gaze of the Gazelle* in 2011 through Seagull Books. In an intriguing account, Neda Soltani tells us of her case of mistaken identity and an ensuing life of tragedy leading to eventual exile when her photo was confused with Neda Agha Soltan, the young woman who was shot and dies on camera, in her book *My Stolen Face* (2012), published by Random House. What makes these books interesting and different from previous narratives is that as much as being about what happened in 2009, they are also offering a very local kind of insider account of recent Iranian history. This was what was missed from the Western understanding until recently about Iran due to limited accessibility until the Internet, social and digital platforms opened the floodgates.

The Internet and New Avenues of Publication

While social media has, without a doubt, offered a space through which local narratives could be told for a global digital audience, by its very fleeting nature based on short modes of communication it, however, only provides for mere glimpses. There is, however, an additional

and emerging space in the digital realm which provides for new ways these narratives could be expanded and disseminated. The gradual introduction and popularity of online platforms for self-publication and the increased accessibility of digital and e-books for readers at cheaper prices have not only permanently shifted the production of writing and its consumption, but they have also given new opportunities for the expression of alternative, marginal and local narratives. These platforms, which bypass the lengthy process of traditional publishing censors, gatekeepers and editors, as well as avoiding the marketing and political agendas of publishing houses, provide an almost immediate and accessible avenue for anyone with a story to tell to share them with large global audiences. While small, online self- publishing companies such as Lulu.com had already established systems through which anyone could publish their work for a good few years, more recently, bigger and more mainstream companies have also been offering self and digital publishing options for anyone across the globe. For example, Amazon.com has set up self and e-publishing possibilities through their digital Kindle Editions, as well as through Create Space Publishing. These offer accessible tools for publication whereby being a published author, and reaching audiences of millions worldwide, is as easy as uploading a cover image and manuscript onto a digital platform of choice.

While there could be a downside to this as there is a lack of professional gatekeepers to control the quality of the work—and there is a definite and visible decrease in the literary merit and presentation of some of the books—there is also an upside. That is, this space provides a freer and more accessible space for the telling of uncensored and raw stories that exist for their own merit and not as commercial commodities for publishing houses. This has revolutionised the publishing and book industries as we have traditionally known them. As Kate Elham puts it, "in the digital age, the book has been liberated from its print container. This is the biggest shift that writers, readers, and publishers must make" (qtd in Cantatore 252).

Given the highly censored nature of their society, Iranians in general have taken great advantage of this new system of expression and dissemination. In Iran, publishing a book is a lengthy process, requiring the bypass of several rigorous governmental and censorship gatekeepers and stages. Even then, when a book is published domestically, the chances of it reaching a global audience are slim and often books remain accessible only domestically for Persian readers. However, this has recently begun to change. Over the last decade or so numerous online and self-publishing sites have been set up from mostly outside of Iran, such as Nogaam, Nakojaa and Gardoon. They have been offering writers the opportunity to publish and disseminate their work, free from censorship constraints and for an international and digital

audience. This has allowed for local narratives being told from Iran to reach the global audience of the Iranian diaspora - some of whom cannot return to Iran - to gain insightful knowledge about current local developments and news. Similarly, digital self-publishing enables those Persian writers working from outside of Iran to also have the means to reach readers and audiences in Iran, thus providing a fruitful space for the expression and exchange of ideas and narratives.

Beyond Iran and Persian readers and writers, this method of publication has also become popular amongst Iranian writers in English. Getting published by a commercial publisher in the traditional sense is a difficult process. The authors and their stories are judged against their commercial and economic viability, as well as their literary merits. While a few Iranian writers in English have had major commercial breakthrough, these have been people with a high command over English language and culture, and the know-how to cater themselves and their stories to the needs of their audiences and publishers. If we glimpse into the kinds of books published by big house publishing from the Iranian diaspora, we see they are not those who necessarily have the most thrilling stories to tell, but those who hold the above credentials. For example, one can name Azar Nafisi as an author who has had major commercial success with her three books. Her background as a professor of English literature, and her many years of living in the United States, gives her the knowledge and literary merit to be a viable success for publishing houses. Similarly, the fiction writers too, who have had great commercial success are those for whom English is almost their first language. They are those who identify themselves more with their Western homes than their Iranian ones. For instance, Porochista Khakpour, Gina Nahai and Nahid Rachlin, just to name a few, have all been educated in the West, and were either born outside of Iran, or migrated and were educated outside from an early age.

This has meant that those who are new migrants, those who do not have such command of the English language, knowledge of the publishing industry and the literary merit to ensure a successful commercial publication have, until now, been almost entirely left out of the publication loop. A survey of the body of work existing prior to the advent of self-publishing reveals that there are hardly any books by newly arrived Iranians, or even by longer-term migrants who had not effectively managed to blend into the fabric of their host country. As the result of this lack of literary merit, linguistic ability, and cultural assimilation, many of those with great stories to tell had not managed to gain a mainstream publisher's attention. This has meant that until recently, much of our perspective of what was published in book form about

local narratives from Iran came from a limited and more established group within the Iranian diaspora. But by their very nature, this group could not really offer very insightful or detailed narratives about life in contemporary Iran from a true insider's perspective.

Over the last several years, digital platforms of publication have changed this. The interest in new kinds of local narratives about Iran, mostly brought about by a combination of the images and posts coming out of Iran now through social media feeds and the new avenues of publications which allow for these narratives to quickly be published and reach global audiences, has dramatically changed the kinds of stories emerging from Iran in English. One can see an increase in the number of self-published and digital books written by Iranian authors in English. Since 2011 there have been dozens of self-published books by members of the Iranian diaspora in English. Among them, one can name Simon Sion Ebrahimi's *Veiled Romance* (2011), Hossein Tirgan's *Goodbye Iran* (2012), Hassan Tabib's *Under Pressure from the Pasdaran and the CIA* (2012) and *Mission in Tehran* (2012), Naser Shahrivar's *The Man Who Could Not Say Love* (2012), Jalil Mortazavi's *From Iran to America: Changes, Choices, Challenges* (2013), Ferdows Kazami's *Unwanted Son* (2013), Mary Noor's *The Secret Bond with my Jewish Friend* (2013), A. Mir's *My Hidden Past* (2013), Mehrdad Goudarzi's *A Letter from Iran* (2013), Siavosh Khonsari's *Out of Iran: My Journey through Revolutions and Life* (2013) and Mahmoud Fotouhi's *The Visionary Memoirs of a Mirza-turned-Banker* (2016).

In looking at the synopses of some of the above mentioned books, while there are definitely a few that address the recent and immediate situation of Iran, such as Kazemi's *Unwanted Son,* the majority are not about the current situation. Rather, they are stories that offer a pan-historic perspective with a multiplicity of voices and narratives about Iran over the last several decades. However, while they still appear to be telling delayed narratives, there is a difference here between those delayed narratives that were previously published when Iran was still inaccessible. This difference lies mainly in the way digital media, particularly social media, has framed their reception. With glimpses into life in Iran through various social media outlets, these new narratives have a much clearer social, political and historical context, where people can clearly see the progress and the situation of contemporary Iran in contrast to them. As such they cannot be confused with being reflections of current life in Iran.

For a diasporic community, especially one as complicated as the Iranian one which is dealing with many different political issues and carrying an historic burden of ongoing hostilities between Iran and the rest of the world and the anxieties of resettlement and assimilation, the availability of such a space, and the interest of reader in these stories, is

reassuring. It gives writers a sense of confidence to narrate their own personal, local and historic stories. The international interest in what is going on in Iran is reflected through social media and assures writers that there is an avid readership of global digital audiences for their work. Additionally, this confidence is boosted by the knowledge that they are not to some degree contributing to an already stereotypical pool of narratives that further alienates them. Rather, thanks to the already emerging and changing, less stereotypical depiction of Iran coming out of various social media outlets, they can rest assured that their stories are contributing to the construction of a richer and fuller understanding of the complicated local histories and lives of Iran.

Conclusion

While it is an undeniable fact that digital and social media have opened up space for the expression of marginal and lesser-heard narratives, I believe the consequences of this have had a much more far-reaching effect on countries and cultures which have, for political and cultural reasons, been more isolated and marginalised. While it is true that rural and less metropolitan areas in Western society could also be said to be benefiting from this new space of expression, I believe the effects of this new media are much more visible and powerful for those who have gained this opportunity for global expression despite various social and political censorships, historical stereotypes and linguistic differences. The Iranian situation makes a great case study, particularly in demonstrating the link between social media as a preliminary space for the engagement and introduction of a topic and the digital platforms of publication for their expression to the full.

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