READING MUSLIM WOMEN:
THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S MEMOIRS

by

Nicole Fiore
Department of Integrated Studies in Education
McGill University, Montreal
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Abstract

This study looks at a growing trend in literature: memoirs written by women from Islamic countries. It will deal specifically with the cultural significance of these books in North American culture with special consideration of how the Muslim religion is depicted and therefore relayed to the North American audience. Finally, this paper will look at how these memoirs, and other texts like them, can be used in the classroom to teach against Islamophobia.

Cette étude porte sur une tendance de plus en plus importante dans la littérature contemporaine, celles des mémoires écrits par les femmes des pays islamiques. Plus précisement, cette étude se penche sur la portée culturelle de ces livres dans la culture nord-américaine. Une attention particulière est porté à la façon dont la religion musulmane est représentée et, par conséquent, relayée au grand public nord-américain. Enfin, ce document examinera comment ces mémoires et d'autres similaires peuvent être utilisés en classe pour sensibiliser les élèves aux dangers de l'islamophobie.

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Table of Contents Page

It was the summer of 2005, and I had just finished my undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature. Relishing in the freedom, I hopped on a flight to Florida, visiting my grandmother of course, to spend a few months in the US catching up on all those "leisure books" that had piled up during the last few months of my degree. Despite being "free" from school, I was nevertheless inspired by my classes on literary theory, as well as a fourth year seminar class on depictions of women from "the East." One of the first books I read that summer was *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, by Azar Nafisi. While I enjoyed reading the book on the beach that summer, I could not help wondering what all the fuss was about. Yes, it was a unique memoir, written by an Iranian woman about a country I knew little about, but I still wondered what was it about this book that North Americans were so obsessed with. I mean, wasn't Iran supposedly part of the "Axis of Evil" along with Iraq and North Korea? Why would Americans want to read about a woman from Iran? I wanted to know more, and realized I could find more and more books set in the Middle East, or simply in Muslim countries, in my local bookstore.

It occurred to me that because North America had spent many years in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was natural that we should also have a bit of an obsession with the culture. But as I perused the titles in the bookstore, I began to wonder, what are we obsessed with? And what does that say about us? I found as I continued my sporadic visits to the bookstore in both the US and Canada that there were more and more stories written by women about their lives and experiences in the Middle East and Muslim countries. There were also

investigative reports, special editions of magazines, and even books by female journalists who wrote about their experiences in the Middle East, often concerned with what it is like for a Western woman living in an Islamic regime. It was clear, America wanted to see "behind the burqa" and women from these countries, especially those now living in a Western country, wanted to tell the world about radical Islam's war against women. To answer my question, it appears the North American public is quite obsessed with women, their bodies – the covering of it, and violence against it – and the religion that influences these actions.

A Teacher with Questions

As a teacher of young adults I began to question how our culture's obsession with women from the Middle East affected how my students viewed Muslims both here and abroad. Being a young teacher, only lucky enough to get short-term contracts filling in for teachers sick or on maternity leave, I was never with a group of students long enough to truly develop a long-term program discussing all the major issues of the day, but I knew I wanted to teach with certain ideas in mind. Although I did not quite acknowledge it in myself at the time, I taught with the belief that part of a teacher's job is to be an activist, promoting social justice and equality in the classroom, while encouraging students to ask questions and be critical of the status quo. I therefore asked the question, how would this collection of books, now considered a genre, contribute to my students' thoughts about the wars now waging in Muslim countries? Who was being represented in these books, and who was not? Would they take these books seriously? Or would they read about these foreign cultures as if they were just

another one of Shahrazad's *Arabian Tales*? Would any of them be interested in these books at all? Finally I wondered: how could I use these books as a tool to begin a discussion on both the oppression of women as well as the growing Islamophobia I saw in our post-9/11 society?

Finding a Framework

With these questions in the back of my mind I began my studies at McGill University. Following what I knew I loved and felt passionate about, a Masters degree in Culture and Values in Education was an easy choice for me. The new literature and theories were at first overwhelming; during my undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature I had never read John Dewey or Lev Vygotsky. Yet, as I delved deeper into educational theorists, I finally experienced the comforting feeling of not only "finding answers," but also of finding thinkers who were saying what I had been *feeling*. While great authors have spoken about it informally, this experience is often brushed over, or not considered very important. I believe that the moment when you discover someone has put down in words the very essence of what you have been feeling, but just may not have had the adequate vocabulary to express, can be very powerful. I had this experience when reading, listening to, and speaking with Joe Kincheloe.

His passion when speaking in front of our class was inspiring. It was literally something I had never experienced before in a classroom anywhere. I could truly feel that he *felt* and believed in the words he spoke. Not only was he passionate about what he was teaching, but as I later came to understand, he was

also passionate about and cared deeply for those he was teaching *to* – us, the students. I had never felt so inspired, so emblazoned with a passion to teach, and so simply empowered. He was saying what I felt, he gave context to my questions about North America's focus on women in Muslim countries, and he helped me think about ways I could pose questions in my classes that would truly get my students to think about these issues. He was talkin' critical pedagogy, and I was listenin'.

Critical pedagogy

While there have been countless books devoted to analyzing it, critiquing it, and simply describing it, briefly, "critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not" (McLaren, 2009, p. 63). Education is so heavily concerned with knowledge; questions of where it comes from and *who* it comes from are of great importance. Critical pedagogy understands that "some forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than others" and this imbalance leads to human suffering (Ibid, p. 63). Therefore critical pedagogues work to alleviate human suffering by "seeking out the causes of such suffering" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 11-12). The perspective I employ in this paper has been based on the critical pedagogical assumption that a critical teacher must work with the following tenets in mind:

- A teacher must have a clear educational purpose.

- Social, cultural, political and economic factors affect both students' and teachers' understanding of themselves, each other, the curriculum and knowledge in general.
- All types of knowledge are valid.
- Dialogue with students is necessary to create a curriculum that is relevant to the lives of students.
- Power affects the way we teach. The classroom and education in general does not exist in a vacuum devoid of a political dimension.
- Positivist notions of the "correct" way to teach must be challenged.
- The dominant culture holds the privilege of being able to decide whose knowledge is legitimate, and whose is not.

In lieu of simply explaining the concepts and theories of critical pedagogy, let me tell you a story of an average day for a teacher who begins with a foundation in critical pedagogy. To begin, our teacher is a white female, of an upper-middle class background from the suburbs of a major metropolis. She teaches in a high school in a diverse suburb. While the majority of her students are white, there is also a large South Asian population with students from India, Pakistan, and Malaysia. While most of her students speak English fluently, many also speak at least one other language.

Before class begins, before she knows her class schedule, before the school year even starts, a critical pedagogical teacher will have deliberately set out to define her purpose and positionality as a teacher. More than a CV or a "to do" list, or even a list of major goals, a critical teacher must know where she is

coming from and where, with her classes, she wants to end up. Kincheloe (2008) worries that a clear educational purpose is often what is lacking in discussions, statements or reforms put forth by educational leaders, and "without this grounding, their conversations about what to do in schooling go around in circles with little direction and less imagination" (p. 6). Therefore, a critical teacher will begin with her own conceptualization of the purpose of schooling.

As a critical pedagogue she will care deeply about how all her students relate to what is being taught in her class and she will understand that because her students come from differing backgrounds they will all relate to her class content differently. She will also understand that there are many factors that affected the social, cultural, political and economic identities of her students before they even entered a classroom, and those factors continue to shape and influence her students. Finally, she will recognize that as a teacher society has situated her in a hierarchy that places her above her students, in a more powerful position. She knows that she must work to show her students that they too hold power in her classroom, and that this education is *theirs* and not just hers because she is the teacher.

Besides purpose, a teacher with a background in critical pedagogy will also make clear to herself and her students her positionality. This means she will recognize who she is and how she is recognized in society. For example, she would first perhaps identify with her gender. She is female and understands that males and females are not treated equally in society, despite the liberal refrain that refutes this. She knows that there are more male principles than females, and that

men hold more positions of power in education than females. She also knows the influence of her socio-economic level: being from the upper-middle class, she is privileged enough to have attended university, gain her teaching certificate and get a job in a school. She is also a practicing Christian and therefore, recognizes that her religion is aligned with the dominant culture that values Christian ideals and beliefs as normative. This positioning is important because "as we examine the self and its relationship to others in cosmological, epistemological, linguistic, social, cultural and political contexts, we gain a clearer sense of our purpose in the world, especially in relation to justice, interconnectedness, and even love" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 94). As a white, middle-class Christian she will have had a different experience than, for example, a Pakistani, male student whose first language is Urdu.

A critical teacher will show her students that they also hold power. She does this not only by asking questions of the curriculum herself and by attempting to teach something different, but also by allowing her students to become part of the curriculum-making process. This is a complex process that involves researching the background and interests of her students.

For example, critical pedagogues understand the importance of culture and how large a role it plays in the lives of their students. Therefore a critical teacher holds knowledge from a wide range of popular culture including television, movies and the internet, music, the radio and video games. She will also be especially concerned with "alternative bodies of knowledge produced by indigenous, marginalized or low-status groups" because as a critical pedagogue

she understands "the ways different forms of power operate to construct identities and empower and oppress particular groups" (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 17). While this may be challenging, the critical teacher understands that in order to truly connect in a meaningful way with students, understanding *their* culture and background is necessary.

Another layer of this complex theory is that teachers must be researchers of their students. Yet today this can be difficult given the fact that it has become increasingly apparent that teachers are less and less valued in our society. The threat that certain educational reforms have placed on teachers, especially in the United States, is that if students' test scores do not improve, *teachers' jobs* are on the chopping block. This general treatment of teachers has made it clear that teachers are becoming increasingly regarded as robots, trained only in the skill of relaying knowledge from a textbook to the student in what Paulo Freire (1970) refers to as the banking method of schooling. In this method, Freire describes the teacher as a narrator who "expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students" whose only "task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration" (p. 71). In clear terms Freire continues: "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 72). This, unfortunately is often the typical function of a teacher in the current educational climate: with a provincial or state-wide standardized curriculum, the teacher need only read the government-approved curriculum, familiarize herself with the textbook and follow along with the

teacher's manual, again, effectively reducing her to a robot whose sole purpose is to relay knowledge and not ask questions.

As a critical pedagogue, our teacher knows that she will have to reject this notion of schooling. Instead, as Kincheloe (2008) encourages, a critical teacher will "engage in constant dialogue with students that questions existing knowledge and problematizes the traditional power relations that have served to marginalize specific groups and individuals" (p. 19). This dialogue is how she will become a researcher of her students.

Critical pedagogues understand that traditional schooling's assumption that standardized curriculum will serve the most students in the best way is untrue. Instead, this standardized curriculum further privileges the already privileged dominant culture in society, while further marginalizing those who do not hold the cultural capital to successfully ascend the socio-economic standing they were born into. Through dialogue a teacher working with her students will seek to understand their respective communities, cultures and even languages, and address the various difficulties facing each. While this may take time away from the traditional curriculum, a teacher working with the beliefs and concepts of critical pedagogy knows that this is a necessary part of what is referred to as the "double curriculum." This double curriculum involves teaching students the necessary facts and information that will allow them to pass standardized tests, as well as the knowledge that their curriculum privileges some, while marginalizes others. A critical teacher knows that through her teaching her students need to be

able to create a counter curriculum, one that comes from their own life experiences, and relates to their own lives and communities.

One key understanding of a teacher basing her classes in critical pedagogy is that education is enmeshed in various power relationships. As Kincheloe (2008) points out, society has the perception that education is simply, "good" or "unbiased" (p. 2); however, as critical pedagogues know, everything is political. Let us take a peek inside our teacher's classroom. In it we see the standard items: desks, chairs, books, maybe even a chalk board. If she is lucky enough, we will also see various technologies that will assist her throughout the day: a computer, printer, scanner, and maybe even a Smartboard. We also cannot forget those less inanimate items which also influence her teaching but may not necessarily show up in the class: her principal, a school trustee, or school board superintendent. While our teacher may not go to great lengths to understand how something like a piece of chalk wields power in her classroom, she will have considered why some classrooms have a chalk board, while others have a Smartboard. As a critical pedagogue she will have questioned not only why that item, be it a Smartboard, Macintosh Computer, or MacMillan textbook, is there and how she will use it in class, but she will also question how it got there. Did Apple donate computers in order to encourage brand loyalty in her young students? Did Smartboard donate the technology in order to force administrators to purchase the corresponding programs and curriculum? To explore this issue of power in the classroom, let us look closer at the textbook.

Throughout the history of schooling in North America, the textbook has been viewed as a voice of authority. According to Firer (1998), students "use textbooks and other printed teaching material 90 to 95 percent of their working time" (p. 196). These textbooks are often never questioned, and the knowledge they purvey is simply taken as fact. A critical pedagogue knows that "knowledge is not produced somewhere in textbook offices and then transferred to the student" (Peterson, 2009, p. 313). In order to be true to the tenets of critical pedagogy, a conscious teacher will first recognize that the facts presented in textbooks are not "value-free" (Ibid, p. 315), and are not objective knowledge because objective knowledge is impossible; we as teachers, as researchers, as writers, cannot stand as objective observers outside reality. This is a positivist notion. Positivism is a "philosophical orientation" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 27) that influences the way we see the world. Its basic tenets are that the world can and should be ordered into logical categories and that as researchers, given a set of assumptions, we should be able to predict the behaviour of just about anything. In general, the set of assumptions or rules positivists use is the Scientific Method. Therefore, *any* phenomenon, whether it is in the physical realm or the social realm, can be observed and its behaviour verified using these rules. A critical pedagogue challenges this positivist mind frame everyday she teaches.

A critical teacher knows she will have to be critical of the knowledge found in textbooks. No matter how objective the tone of the textbook, it was nevertheless written by a person who researched a subject, analyzed data and eventually produced a textbook. This person has experiences and assumptions

that affect the way he/she writes. It is important to uncover who writes textbooks because the content in those textbooks reach so many students and influence their ideas about the world. The authors' backgrounds and political leanings matter.

Critical teachers will also inquire as to who is publishing their textbooks. While there seem to be many publishing houses producing books today, in reality there are actually only a handful of companies that own the smaller publishing houses, thereby reducing the amount of diversity in the market (Schiffrin, 2000). This can become dangerous when these large multinational corporations do not divulge their agenda, and continue to produce textbooks that purport to hold objective knowledge. In reality, the "facts" given in these textbooks are selective at best (Peterson, 2009), and incorrect in the worst-case scenario (Sensoy, 2009), simply to encourage a worldview that would further privilege the current socio-political climate that benefits corporate interests.

Critical pedagogy seeks to expose this truth, to teachers through teacher education programs, and to students with the help of teachers themselves. Critical teachers do this by asking questions of the "norm." They believe it is important to interrogate this topic, the norm being the commonly accepted beliefs, values, assumptions and ideas of the dominant culture. Through the creation of normalcy, the idea of what is normal, we are also creating its counter, "the other," or those who do not share the commonly accepted beliefs, values, and assumptions of the dominant culture. The otherization of individuals, when the normativized beliefs of society necessarily drive a person to the periphery of society, leads inevitably to the suffering of these individuals.

While critical pedagogy is, at its outset, a politically motivated process, at its core it is dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering, and it views education as the primary vehicle with which to drive home this goal. Education is considered a political space in which all its elements, physical, textual or otherwise, are understood to hold power, some having more power and therefore more legitimacy than others. Critical pedagogues seek to understand why this is, and how these power imbalances hurt certain students while they privilege others.

I found that critical pedagogy enabled me to label what I knew was missing from other frameworks: an analysis of the unequal distribution of power and wealth across the globe that contributed to the frequency of wars and conflict. Kincheloe (2008) was able to articulate for me:

> Too often, mainstream education teaches students and teachers to accept the oppressive workings of power – in the name of a neutral curriculum, in the attempt to take politics out of education. Critical pedagogy moves students, workers, and citizens to question the hidden political assumptions and the colonial, racial, gender, and class biases of schooling and media education. Critical pedagogy induces students to question these power plays that lead to human suffering. (p. 34)

My reading of critical pedagogy brought up questions about how my students view and experience the world. What about those that are silenced when books like the ones in my study get published? Whose story is not getting published? How and why do some books remain on the bestseller list for months, while others never make it to the list at all? These are all questions that involve power relations and figuring out whose story matters, while others are marginalized. We must ask uncomfortable questions, and hear uncomfortable stories.

Looking at the memoirs in my study from a critical pedagogical perspective I find there is no such thing as neutral, bias-free information because power plays a role in how we see the world. It can even play a role in how we see ourselves.

Framing the Subject

Throughout history when we are faced with a society or culture we know nothing about we often turn to literature as a primary source of information. Edward Said (2000) refers to this as having a "*textual* attitude" (p. 272). While technology has changed the medium of the text - we can now quickly translate words or access Wikipedia from our iPhones - traditional literature, paperback and hard cover books and novels, are fortunately still being read. The travel book section of the book store is still crowded and novels about foreign cultures are often bestsellers. It is problematic when the texts "*create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (Said, 2000, p. 273). Summarizing Foucault, Said goes on: "In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it (Ibid, p. 273). While we often read books for leisure, they nevertheless serve to inform us about their subject, especially when we are reading about something we know little about. Whether it is an event in history or a foreign culture, what we read in a book will affect our understanding of that history or culture.

The growing number of books that are written by women from Muslim countries reflects our society's interest in places like Iraq or Afghanistan, countries that North America and its Western allies are currently at war with. Knowing that texts have the ability to "*create*" knowledge, as responsible teachers we must ask ourselves, what is the cultural significance of these books? How are they informing our students about Muslim culture and even about North American culture? In order to understand how these books affect our cultures, we must first understand what Kincheloe & Steinberg (2004) call *The Miseducation of the West.* How and why have our perceptions of the Muslim world been influenced and how has that led to our collective miseducation?

Miseducation: Basis in Orientalism

The miseducation of the West begins with the notion that our (North America, Europe, the "West") conception of the "East," is more a reflection and even a *creation* of our own ideas and beliefs about the East, than an accurate representation of the East itself. This concern has been summarized and theorized by postcolonial authors who concern themselves with the legacy of colonialism and how it has affected the nations, cultures and people that were colonized. Most notably, Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" focuses on documenting how the Western world has created an image of the East – Arabs and/or Muslims in particular.

Edward Said (2001) explains that colonized Arab Muslims of North Africa and the Middle East were "*made* Oriental" during the colonization of the 18th, 19th

and even 20th centuries (p. 1994). This meant depictions of Muslims and Arabs were influenced by imperialist and colonial notions that saw the East as inferior to the dominant, more powerful Western world. Said's Orientalism, "essentialized a radical difference between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us'), and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')... This gave the West legitimate authority to not only represent the Orient, but to change its reality" (as qtd. In Moghissi, 1999, p. 33). The result was a powerful West creating an image of an East that had little to do with reality. The danger in this construction was that this was not simply a few stereotypes, but rather an entire body of knowledge that was coloured by imperial sentiment and sought "control of the other through knowledge" (Moghissi, 1999, p. 33). Today we as teachers and as a public in general, must deal with the repercussions of these Orientalized constructions of the East. As teachers we must deal with textbooks that display little or no information on Muslims and Arabs, and sometimes provide information that is misleading. For example, Sensoy (2009), remarks that while the highest population of Muslims is found in Indonesia, most textbook images display Muslims as Arab or of Middle Eastern decent. The general public is also confronted with Orientalized images of Muslims through the media's continued use of Arabs and Muslims as "the bad guys." As the concept of Orientalism infers, the Western world receives a constructed notion of what it means to be "Arab" or "Muslim," a notion that is often incorrect or essentialized. What results is a body of knowledge that presents a set of assumed and "accepted norms, commonsense ideas about people and commonsense ways of organizing the world and the people in it – such as *the Muslim World* (Sensoy, 2009, p. 80).

This body of knowledge that has informed Western assumptions about the Muslim world has served to make our two cultures virtually unknowable to the other, and not without consequences.

Islamophobia

There has been a noticeable increase in violence and hatred towards to Muslims in the nine years since 9/11. The European Monitoring Centre on Xenophobia and Racism reported that there has been increased hostility and violence towards Muslims since 9/11 and suggested that politicians and the media could play an important role in changing this trend (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). This hatred and hostility can often develop into discrimination and racism. While it can be defined in many ways, this ideology is the basis of Islamophobia. In general, Islamophobia is the "discrimination, dehumanization, and misrepresentations of Muslims, those of Muslim heritage, and a systemic miseducation about Islam itself" (Kincheloe, Steinberg & Stonebanks, 2010, p. x). Often the person discriminating or dehumanizing feels hatred and hostility towards the Muslim religion.

Islamophobia plays out in many venues of the social world today. Whether it is the despicable rejection of an Islamic Cultural Centre a few blocks away from where the Twin Towers once stood, or prohibition of the hijab in schools, hatred and hostility towards the religion of Islam is affecting Muslims in North America in a very real and noticeable way.

A large body of research tells us that the media on a whole presents a negative view of the Middle East and the Islamic World (Stonebanks, 2009; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2002; Said, 2000, 2001; Kincheloe, Steinberg & Stonebanks, 2010). Whether it is investigative reports on CNN, or the constant image of "the bad guys" being of Islamic decent, "the picture drawn is a unanimous one. 'Islam' means the end of civilization as 'we' know it. Islam is anti-human, antidemocratic, anti-Semitic, antirational" (Said, 2005, p. 5). Drawing on the work of Jack Shaheen, Jhally's (2006) film features an expansive amount of films from the forties to the present, highlighting the way Muslims and Arabs are continually presented as deceptive, extreme, cold and heartless, and at the very least exotic, immoral, and simply, *different* (Jhally, 2006). The film tracks the many layers of this deep-rooted North American imagining of what it must be like to live as an Arab.

The seemingly harmless depictions of Arabs feature rich, over-sexed, over weight and often bumbling, buffoon-type men, or sensual, submissive, enticing women. However, as the film goes on to display, certain Arabs, specifically Palestinians, are singled out and time and again depicted solely as ruthless and godless killers, bent on killing not only Jews, but anyone in their way. Considering American presidents often take it upon themselves to host peace talks between Israel and Palestine, it is a dangerous precedent to set when the only image American popular culture depicts is of the irrational Palestinian killer, whose only aim is to destroy Israel. If a member of the American public were to

only see these images of Palestinians, this person might wonder why the president would ever want to host such terrorists.

Steinberg (2010) targets the television industry's obsession with "home-grown" Muslim terrorists. Shows like *24* and *Sleeper Cell*, suggest to the American public even the most unassuming Americans may be secret Muslim terrorists. Popular culture in America rarely even sees Arab or Muslim characters *any other way*. They pop up now and then on shows like *Law & Order* or *Law & Order: Criminal Intent.*, but they seem to reiterate the belief that "[e]ven when you think all the Arabs and/or Muslims are not guilty, one of them is guilty" (Steinberg, 2010, p. 95). The North American dessert to a nightly entrée of scary Muslims on the news is even more negative depictions of Muslims on these primetime television shows.

It seems that Arabs and Muslims are relegated to one of three roles, labelled "'the three Bs' – belly dancers, billionaire sheiks and bombers" (Booth, 2007). The result of the continual bombardment of negative images of Muslims, Arabs and the Middle East is not simply a stereotype that has been played ad nauseum, but rather it has become a "system of ideas" that has remained "unchanged as teachable wisdom... a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment," (Said, 2001, p. 1995). Not only is it an ingrained technique of films and television, but Islamophobia is also typical in the education system and even curriculum that is devoted to learning about Muslims, Arabs and the Middle East (Sensoy &

Stonebanks, 2009; Kincheloe, Steinberg & Stonebanks, 2010; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004).

As Sensoy (2009) discusses, students learn little about the Middle East and Islam from textbooks in school. In her study she mockingly asks the question, "Where the Heck is the 'Muslim World' Anyway?" remarking that Muslims can be found all over the world, in many different settings and cultures, and that while many people equate the Middle East and Arabic culture with Islam, there are many Arabs who are not Muslims and there are many Muslims who are not Arabic. This is not necessarily common knowledge, and teachers who do not look beyond their textbooks may not be able to discuss the diversity in the Islamic religion. Ali Khan (2009) remarks of her own experience: "educational and societal curricula do little to confront deeply seated and normalized prejudices in anti-Arab/ Muslim/ "people from over there" sentiments" (p. 156). When the majority of pre-service teachers are white, the common understanding that a teacher's job is to socialize a student into his/her culture becomes problematic (Stonebanks, 2009). In whose culture will he/she be "socializing" the students? Whose culture will be valued? Whose values will be privileged and given a voice? Whose culture will remain voiceless? When there is a lack of knowledge about one or another group, the result is a tendency to essentialize all members of the group, based on little, and often inaccurate information.

An important norm that seems to be upheld throughout all types of Islamophobic literature and media is that "*Islam* (and the Middle East) and *the West* (and in particular, the United States, and democracy associated with the US)

are, in general, incompatible" even to the extent of "ideological incompatibility" (Sensoy, 2009, p. 74-5). Orientalism examines the fact that the social phenomenon of creating binaries, separating two seemingly opposing ideas, invariably favours one side over the other. This is easy to see with binaries like, "exotic/ modern; third world/first world; autocracy/democracy; savaged/civilized, etc" (Ibid, p. 72). If a first world country is preferred to a third world country, and civilization is preferred to savagery, it follows that modern is more favourable to exotic, and West trumps East. These binaries, ingrained and naturalized by a culture seeped in images and stories that depict an essentialized version of Muslims and Arabs, invariably contribute to an understanding that there is something so different about our two cultures that we cannot possibly ever agree on how to co-exist in the world. This results in an "us" and "them" mentality. Not only are the East and West incompatible, but the difference is seen as a "natural irreconcilable gulf between *them* and *us*" (Ali Khan, 2009, p. 155). This is a dangerous thought when we live in a society that is so quick to go to war.

Outline of the Paper

As a teacher I feel I have a responsibility to address the issues that I see growing, deepening, and sharpening through images in popular culture, in the news, and through certain educational materials that continue to depict Muslims in a one-sided, negative way. Knowing that my students inevitably are influenced by the media's proliferation of negative images and stereotypes of Muslims and the Middle East, my goal is to uncover ways to "reach" my students and get them

to think differently about the subject, or at the very least to question certain assumptions.

As a teacher (and lover) of literature my natural tendency is to begin a dialogue by introducing my students to some kind of narrative that relates to the issue being studied. This is what originally drew me to collecting books written by women from Muslim countries. I believe my students benefit from hearing from the "other side" of the story, and better yet, from the voice of a woman. I have spent enough time in Chapters and Barnes and Nobles to know that there is a large selection of books written by women from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan or North Africa, talking about life in those countries. It is my desire to use these books to show my students that not all Muslims are terrorists, that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had real and dangerous consequences for the civilians in those countries, and that perhaps, war was wrong. Inspired by the passion of Joe L. Kincheloe, and building on critical pedagogy as the basis of my teaching philosophy, at the same time I know that I must also be critical of these memoirs and be sure to ask certain questions of the text, as I would any other text. This process has led me to the following research questions/goals:

1. What is the lived experience of five women from either Afghanistan or Iran through the content analysis of their memoirs as published in the US and Canada?
    a. How do these memoirs influence North American perceptions of Muslims/Islam?
    b. How do teachers use these memoirs to teach against Islamophobia?

While my primary research question is to uncover the lived experience of five women from Iran or Afghanistan through the content analysis of their memoirs, my secondary questions get at the political nature of these memoirs. First, I want to focus on the implications of these memoirs and how they might influence North American readers' perceptions of Muslims and the Muslim countries these books describe. How do these memoirs describe women or the *treatment of* women? What are the implications of these descriptions for an audience currently at war with one country, and in the midst of a political war with the other? These questions point out the political nature of the texts we use in class and therefore, the importance of being critical of these texts.

Secondly, I want to uncover how teachers can use these memoirs in a positive and critical way. When working as critical pedagogues, teachers work towards the alleviation of human suffering and this paper seeks to address the pain that Islamophobia brings to Muslim students as well as the hatred Islamophobia manifests in non-Muslim students who are simply miseducated.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. This introduction has served to describe my personal reasons for conducting this study along with the concepts and theories that have informed me throughout the study. Chapter two will outline how I went about analyzing and coding the literature using a phenomenological approach. The third chapter outlines some historical background information that gives context to the political situation in both Afghanistan and Iran while the forth chapter provides a brief sketch of the backgrounds of the authors and their publishers. Chapter five lays out the six

themes I uncovered after my analysis of the five books. The sixth chapter is a discussion of those themes, and I conclude my thesis with recommendations for using these memoirs in the classroom.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The method one chooses to use to explore a topic is truly dependent upon the questions one presents. My specific research questions influenced the methods I used to explore these issues, which was in turn affected by my beliefs and educational background. There is a distinct relationship between question and method and "the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (or parent or teacher) in the first place" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 2). With that in mind, my primary research concern was to: a) read the lived experience of five women from either Iran or Afghanistan through the content analysis of their memoirs as published in a North American context. My secondary concerns were to b) explore how these memoirs influence North American perceptions of Muslims and the religion of Islam in general; and, c) explore how teachers can use these memoirs to teacher against Islamophobia.

With these concerns in mind and with the tenets of critical pedagogy as a conceptual framework, my approach to the research was undoubtedly qualitative, and specifically phenomenological. In the next sections I will first attempt to place myself in the research and announce my positionality, I will then discuss phenomenology and hermeneutics, and finally I will outline my procedures.

The Role of the Researcher

As a political person, and a political teacher I must first position myself within this study. This is important because as a critical researcher I "assert that

understanding the positioning of the researcher in the social web of reality is essential to the production of rigorous and textured knowledge. As long as researchers and consumers of knowledge do not understand where they themselves and other researchers stand in this social web, scholars will have a thin and distorted conception of the research process and the data it produces" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 119). With that in mind, I am a white, middle-class, Christian female**.** As a teacher with a degree in Language and Literature, literature holds a special place in my heart. To me, there are few things that compare to a great book because of its ability to completely transport the reader to other places, other times and other worlds. For this reason I believe literature, personal narrative in particular, holds an important place in education. It is my belief that telling a story is often more effective in the classroom than simply reading information from a textbook and expecting students to memorize and regurgitate.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize that not all are lucky enough to enjoy reading as I do. It is my privilege that has allowed me the time to read for pleasure and the expectation that I do this. While English was always my favourite class in high school, and that passion made it clear for me what program to apply to in university, I knew there were many students for whom English was their *least* favourite subject. This became even more apparent when I began volunteering and then teaching in the Academic Resource Department at my old high school. Academic Resource was my school's label for the students who were not quite prepared enough to sit with 25 other students in class and listen to

a teacher, but also did not qualify for alternative education programs. So, in these rooms within the high school myself and other dedicated teachers would attempt to give these students one-on-one help with the subjects in which they were struggling. More often than not it would be reading. The growing illiteracy of our students, high school graduates even, is a huge problem in North America today. With this in mind, I know reading is not "fun" for everyone. However, this does not change my belief that narrative can be a powerful tool in the classroom. While a discussion on narrative is not in the scope of this study, I feel that presenting my relationship to narrative is important in announcing who I am and how I perceive narrative.

I also feel that I must mention that as I read these memoirs before engaging in an in-depth analysis, I also recognized a growing sentiment of anti-Islamic rage within America's political right. Seeing this in daily news stories and online articles written by political pundits, and talking heads from a number of backgrounds, is part of what caused me in the first place to take up this issue. I acknowledge myself as a political being, curious of my surroundings and willing to seek information to better understand the way the world is working today.

It is only after situating myself in the research that I can begin to explore my proposed questions. I must first recognize that as a researcher it is my job "to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5). As a researcher passionately aware that a large portion of what is researched in academia is dependent upon "whose problems are deemed most important" by mainstream society (Kincheloe,

2008, p 15), I know that certain voices are not being heard and certain groups of people are being harmed in the process. It was my goal to employ hermeneutic phenomenological writing to fully "be" in the world of my subject, an "intentional act of attaching [myself] to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5), because I know that as I place myself within this world, I am also fostering care for my subject, an important aspect of my own desire to do research.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research – Getting at 'It'

While content analysis of books is not an atypical study, I wanted to uncover the essence of how these women described their lives specifically through their memoirs. I realized quickly that I would not be able to do this using traditional techniques of content analysis that include the frequency count of words or word clusters, or the use of a program to compute my "findings" into charts or graphs. Instead this study's main objective was to explore the lived experience of what it means to be a woman living in Iran or Afghanistan as these women describe in their memoirs and therefore employed hermeneutic phenomenological research as a methodological framework.

Phenomenology is the "study of phenomena in the world as they are constructed by our consciousness" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 120). While phenomenology is the process of finding out the "what" of the phenomenon, hermeneutics is uncovering what it means. As stated above, it was important for me to outline myself in the research. The ultimate goal of a phenomenologist is to

understand the essential meaning of the phenomena as explored through lived experience. In this study I have chosen to explore the lives of women from Iran or Afghanistan through their personal memoirs. As Van Manen (1990) states, "bio-graphy literally means 'description of a life'" and biographies provide rich text filled with the "unique life story" of an individual (p. 71). As biographies are "orientated to individual or private meaning, phenomenology" can be employed to really get at the "existential meaning" of the text (Ibid, p.72). The act of hermeneutic phenomenological writing "aim[s] at elucidating lived experience," uncovering experiences, thoughts, ideas, bits of knowledge that would not otherwise be uncovered in a typical description; "the point is, of course, that the meaning of lived experience is usually hidden or veiled" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 27), therefore we must work at this unveiling process through continuous reflection and re-evaluation.

Phenomenologists know that they are essentially studying "what it means to be human" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 120). This is no easy task, and therefore must be rigorous in their methods. At the same time, it is important that phenomenologists understand that there is no one method, no fixed set of procedures to follow. Instead methods "need to be discovered or invented as a response to the question at hand" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 29). In fact, two studies on the same phenomenon will differ depending on the researcher and how each researcher formulated her/his research questions. In hermeneutic phenomenological research, the goal is to allow themes and ideas to present themselves to the researcher through continuous reading and reflection of the text.

Van Manen (1990) does encourage phenomenologists to turn towards their research with certain assumptions in mind:

1. Choose your phenomenon wisely. It must be something that "seriously interests us and commits us to the world" (p. 30).
2. Pre-reflexivity. We should be studying our phenomenon "as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it" (p. 30).
3. Reflect on themes "which characterize the phenomenon" (p. 30).
4. Continuous process of writing and re-writing. This is how reflection will occur.
5. Stay focused. It is important to have a "strong and orientated pedagogical relation to the phenomenon (p. 31).
6. Be able to contextualize "by considering the parts and whole" (p. 31).

While these are not the "rules" to conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research, they are important guidelines to follow when a phenomenologist orientates him-/herself to a phenomenon and seeks to uncover the essential meaning of a text or lived experience. Essentially, during this kind of research, it is my job when reading the personal memoirs to formulate "a thematic understanding" not by "a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning," and the themes I uncover become simply "a means to get at the notion [I am] addressing" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 79).

The Process - Let's Get To It!

Choosing which woman's memoirs to explore was both pleasurable and difficult. It was difficult because, as stated above, there are currently hundreds of books that qualify for my very loose criteria, an English language memoir of a woman from a Muslim country published in North America. I had a hard time limiting my choices to a reasonable number that could be tackled in a 100 page thesis. The pleasure came in the process, which happens to be one of my favourite things to do, of browsing the book store. I decided that I would go to an easily accessible book store and use easily accessibly memoirs so that my actions would not be any different from a typical teacher who may be thinking of using memoirs in her/his class.

While my initial aim was to simply browse, I did choose certain memoirs for certain reasons. A few I chose because they are well-known to teachers (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Persepolis*); I chose one because I knew the author was known for her part in a semi-autobiographical film about her country (*A Bed of Red Flowers*); one I chose because I knew the author went to high schools to speak about her experience (*Prisoner of Tehran*); the last book was chosen because I had seen the author speak on an online news program, *DemocracyNow*, and found the author interesting (*A Woman Among Warlords*).

I did not initially consider it a criterion, but eventually it became clear to me that I chose memoirs whose authors teachers could easily find more information about, not just women who wrote their story and then disappeared from the

public. The fact that these women have chosen to remain in the public and further the process they started by first writing their memoirs, leads me to believe that they believe they have a purpose, an agenda, in the public eye. This is important because it gives me greater insight into one of my secondary research questions, how do these memoirs influence North American perceptions on Muslims and the religion of Islam?

What follows is my process of reading and extracting information from all five books:

I first read all five books without taking detailed notes. I would make comments in the margins and flag certain events or comments that I found stood out to me, but did not read the books with any specific themes in mind. Of course, being written by women, the books often dealt with women's issues and these issues tied into religion and politics, but also quite noticeably to loyalty, either to a country or religion. There were also obvious instances of transgression and rebellion. These are things that immediately struck me as being important.

My next step was to go over each book in detail. I reviewed the memoirs page-by-page scanning and highlighting for different themes. Following a hermeneutical framework, I did not have specific themes in mind before reading the memoirs; I simply let the themes/categories develop over time. To do this I used different colours to represent the different themes/categories that presented themselves to me. This, of course, was an on-going process of evaluation and re-evaluation. The initial themes/categories I laid out when scanning the memoirs

were not static; they fluctuated, were redefined, and sometimes flowed into one another. Therefore, I did not think of the categories as hard and fast themes, which is why I label them here, "themes/categories."

I arbitrarily took the first memoir and started highlighting sections that dealt with one theme/category in one colour, and when different theme/category arose I chose another colour to represent that new one. For instance, I chose turquoise to represent issues of women's rights that seemed political in nature. When I came to a new concept, religious issues, for example, I used the red pen to highlight. In that way I ended up having many different themes/categories. After scanning and highlighting the first memoir I organized my themes/categories into eight general themes/categories and corresponding colours that I used throughout the rest of the study:

a. Red: Issues dealing with religion
b. Purple: Issues dealing with the relationship between men and women, and specifically the gender expectations of men
c. Turquoise: Women's issues of a political nature, Shariah law, for example, or the loss of rights under Islamic rule.
d. Pink: Issues involving women's physical appearance. For example, their hair, their clothing, as well as any discussion of the hijab, the burqa, the veil. Often when referencing the piece of cloth worn on the head of females in Iran and Afghanistan, the words "hijab", "veil", or "scarf" are used interchangeably.

e. Orange: Dealt with issues involving the notion of loyalty towards the "homeland."
f. Green: Highlighted examples of transgressions and rebellious nature of the authors and other characters of the stories. This could be anything from wearing nail polish or blush under the veil, or speaking in public against government corruption.
g. Dark Blue: Highlighted any sort of political critique about the government. This could take the form of the author or any characters outwardly discussing the government, or examples of government abuse or extremist behaviour. These examples are often supported by the author's comments or opinions.
h. Light Blue: This theme/category was difficult to label because in the different memoirs it often represented different things. For some it was the betrayal of dreams, while for others it represented the stories of the past, or dreams/ideals versus reality. However, the light blue markings overall represented the tendency of the authors to idealize the past and compare it to the demonized present.

While scanning and highlighting the memoirs, I also took down references to each example, noting page number, the theme/category it represented, as well as the specific quote or summary of the reference.

When I finished highlighting the memoirs for each of the eight general themes/categories I decided to reduce these down to three main

categories/concepts that spanned all five memoirs generally. I amalgamated the two sections involving women's issues into one section "On Women." I took certain aspects of the theme/category dealing with the gender expectations of men and incorporated the information with my section on religion to create one section "On Religion." I also decided to incorporate the theme/category on "past versus present" (light blue section), into the theme/category of political critique because the authors seemed to use their images of the past as a way to criticize the present. This section became "On Politics."

I then wrote extensively on each category/concept, going through the themes book by book. For example, for the document titled "On Politics" I went through each memoir, one by one, and outlined the examples in which the author detailed political critique. These became my narratives, addressing my primary research goal, to explore the lived experience of five women in Iran or Afghanistan through the reading of their memoirs. A part of this process was coding these narratives for more specific themes, again letting the themes emerge from the narrative, which eventually produced six themes: *past versus present, the delegitimization of the Iranian and Afghan governments, the delegitimization of Islam, Christianity versus Islam, negative portrayals of Muslims, freedom of women, the continued miseducation of the West*. My hermeneutical analysis of these themes addresses my secondary research question, how do these memoirs influence North American perceptions of Muslims and the religion of Islam? I interpreted these themes to flesh out the cultural implications of these themes. My conclusion deals with my final research question, what are the teaching

implications of this, how can teachers use these memoirs to teach against Islamophobia?

Chapter 3: Background Information

This chapter provides the necessary background information of both the memoirs studied, as well as the countries in which the memoirs take place. The following are brief summaries of the five books in this study followed by a political background of both Iran and Afghanistan.

The Books

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, by Azar Nafisi is a story about an American-educated Iranian professor who returns to Iran after many years studying in America. She arrives in the midst of the Islamic Revolution and describes what life was like for her and her female students. Because she is a professor of literature, she reflects on her society using literature to drive the discussion.

Persepolis, by Marjane Satrapi is a graphic novel that portrays the life of a young girl in Iran during the time leading up to, during, and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The tensions in the country eventually lead to her leaving to go to school in Europe, but Satrapi becomes so homesick she returns home, only to eventually leave the country for good as the story concludes.

Prisoner of Tehran, by Marina Nemat is a story about a young girl in Iran who was imprisoned and sentenced to death for supposedly conspiring against Islam. She is literally about to be shot by a firing squad when one of her jailers arrives to halt the execution. He has fallen in love with her and forces her to convert to Islam and marry him. Her sentence is reduced and eventually she is

released to his care on house arrest. When he is shot and killed she is sent back to prison only to be saved again by her dead husband's father.

Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan, by Nelofer Pazira, details the life of the author in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation and her subsequent escape from the country through the Afghan countryside hidden behind a burqa. She eventually flees to Canada and the book continues to describe her attempts to return to her homeland and what she finds when she is finally able to go back.

A Woman Among Warlords, by Malalai Joya is also an autobiography detailing the author's life in Afghanistan during and after the Russian occupation, throughout the civil war, the reign of the Taliban and the current US occupation. Joya uses her narrative to critique her leaders as well as those who have occupied Afghanistan in recent history.

The Countries

In order to fully appreciate the complex reality of the countries of this study, it is necessary to include a brief recent history of Iran and Afghanistan. Both countries have experienced an "Islamicization," meaning they have gone from having a secular government to having an Islamic government through either revolution or/and or violence and war. The following history of Iran is largely informed by Kincheloe (2004), while the history of Afghanistan is largely informed by Joya (2009).

Iran

Thirty-one years ago, Iran's Islamic Revolution began, seeing the previously exiled Ayatollah Khomeini come back to power as the country's spiritual and political leader. Although many North American histories of the Islamic Revolution begin in 1979 with this fact, the political movement that allowed this to happen had been building for many years. Twenty-six years prior, Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq, was ousted in a military coup backed by the C.I.A. Replacing him was the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a dictator with ties to the US and Britain.

During his reign, the Shah, and later his son, enforced a series of reforms meant to "modernize" the country. One of the first things the Shah did was to ban the hijab, the scarf worn by females to cover their hair while out in public. This was seen as a strong sign of modernization, immediately visible, immediately changing the landscape of the country. In a continued effort to modernize, the Shah continued to make reforms, and contributed to furthering the rights of women. During his rule Iran saw its first female ministers, and the Family Protection Act was created, which among other things granted women the right to divorce their husbands. However, because the Shah saw modernization as secularization, many religious people felt alienated and outcast – uncomfortable in their own country simply by practicing their religion.

The people of Iran also grew more and more angry with the Shah's vast spending on frivolous things while ignoring the poor of the country. Instead of

addressing their problems, the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, would work to silence any protest or dissention through brutal force. In fact, the infamous prison in Tehran, Evin, where Marina Nemat was taken and tortured, and where jailed American hikers, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal are now imprisoned, was first used to house and torture enemies of the Shah, many of which were practicing Muslims. During this time, while there were many advances in freedoms for women, the people of Iran experienced little religious and political freedom, resulting in a tense public. Towards the end of the 1970s, there were frequent demonstrations protesting the Shah's corrupt rule. These protests were often put down by SAVAK in the most brutal way, using extreme violence. People often died. This was the political climate that allowed for the Ayatollah Khomeini to regain power in Iran. When he returned to the country he was welcomed by the people who believed he would help them.

It is also important to note that while many of the people who protested against the Shah were Muslims, there were a large number of secular Iranians who also supported bringing down the Shah. There were many political groups at this time, such as the Marxist Tudeh Party. There were also those who were Muslim but did not support the extreme views of the Ayatollah. The People's Mujahedin of Iran supported democracy and the previously ousted Mossadeq. The Fedayeen were also Marxist-leaning, but were more militant. Once the Ayatollah took power in Iran his government quickly silenced these opposition groups in an effort to consolidate his power.

It was during this period that Azar Nafisi came back to Iran. She talks about the protests that occurred after Khomeini enforced many new rules. The stories of Marjane Satrapi and Marina Nemat also take place during this time.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan also experienced an Islamic revolution, which was only successful after the forced secularization of the Russian occupation. During the late 1970s, Afghanistan experienced political unrest. Like in Iran, the people of Afghanistan grew tired of their monarchy and its corruption. They demanded a change, but it came with a price. During the span of just over one year the country saw three different leaders, two of which were killed, in either a military coup or a palace shootout. In this power struggle, we see some of the same elements that were involved in Iran. There was a reigning monarch, thrown out by a military coup, and in the ensuing power vacuum both Marxist and Islamic groups fought to regain control of the country. The ultimate victor of this particular struggle was the Marxist-leaning People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (PDPA). They could not, however, maintain control without requesting support from Russia, with which Afghanistan had a long and tenuous history.

Being situated between Russia, and Pakistan, which was at one point a part of British-controlled India, Afghanistan was a border state between the British and the Russians and the site of three Anglo-Afghan Wars. Because of its proximity to India, Britain was often worried about Communist influence in the

region and this battle of ideologies is known as the "Great Game" (Tripodi, 2009). While Russia often assisted on behalf of the Afghan government in these conflicts, the Afghan people have never accepted being controlled or occupied by a foreign power. In her book, *A Woman Among Warlords* (2009), Malalai Joya tells us that every foreign invader of Afghanistan has eventually been thrown out. After nearly ten years, even the Russians eventually left Afghanistan. However, it was not without a fight.

Tired of the forced secularization of the Russians, this time the country put their faith in the Islamic based mujahidin. Yet the mujahidin were not a homogenous group and the ethnic divisions among the mujahidin served to divide the rest of the country. Again, in the power vacuum of the departure of the Russians, the weak government of Mohammad Najibullah fell and the warring factions of the mujahidin spiralled into a civil war. For four years these groups, led by two men in particular, waged war on one another and on the citizens of Afghanistan, in an attempt to gain complete control of the country. Ahmed Shah Massoud and his party, Jamiat-i Islami, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his party, Hezb-i Islami, were the main two factions fighting over power, although other groups did contribute to the fighting as well.

The two main groups were funded and supported by either the US and its allies, or Pakistan. Again, Afghanistan became the playing field for other major powers to struggle for power in the region. The US supported Massoud financially, and militarily, supplying SCUD missiles as well as other weapons. This extremely unstable political climate is how the Taliban seized power in 1996.

They had first entered the political scene in Afghanistan in 1994, claiming they would bring an end to the fighting as well as establish a less corrupt Islamic leadership. When the Taliban did take hold of Kabul in 1996 it was with the assistance of Osama bin Laden and Saudi Arabia. This is significant because those in charge of the Taliban were Arabs, while the Afghan people were either Pashtu or Tajik, both of Persian origin and not Arabic. This implies the Taliban can be considered an invading government, supported mainly by the finances of Saudi Arabia. What ensued was the widespread massacre of the Shi'a people of Afghanistan.

When the Taliban took over the government of Kabul the remaining mujahidin fighters fled to the North to attempt to set up a base there. We now recognize this as the "Northern Alliance." Its members, once warring factions from the civil war of 1992-1996, assisted the US in attacking Afghanistan to regain control from the Taliban after 9/11, and eventually became the government. This is ultimately the current reality of the Afghan government.

Chapter 4: Author and Publisher Backgrounds

An important aspect of being a critical researcher is to situate oneself in the research. To maintain this critical stance I will explore the impact of the authors themselves on their text. While their memoirs serve as one way to uncover who these women are, I also want to uncover the context of their writing, and any other pertinent information about them. In the same manner a teacher may examine the literature and authors used in class, in this section I will examine the stance of the authors. What follows is a brief introduction into the five authors from this study, as well as their publishers.

In order to not influence my reading of or engagement with the memoirs, I actually read these memoirs and analyzed them *before* doing any in depth research of the authors. While I did do a brief background study of the five women before I read their memoirs, my primary concern was their current situation, where they lived and if they continue to write and publish, or if this memoir was their sole foray into the world of publishing. I did this primarily for my own interest. I simply wanted to read these texts as if I had just picked them up at a bookstore out of pure interest.

The Authors

Drawing from their own memoirs as well as the publisher's websites or select interviews, the following are brief biographies of the five female authors.

Azar Nafisi was born in Iran into a well-established family. Both her parents were in politics, her father was once mayor of Iran and her mother was a

member of Parliament, and as she claims, past generations of her family were among the literary elite of Iran. Because of their status, Nafisi was educated primarily out of country. She attended a private school in the UK and later completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees in the US after which she moved back to Iran. After teaching in the University of Tehran and later the University of Allameh Tabatabai, she moved back to the US where she now lives and teaches at John Hopkins University in Maryland.

The controversies surrounding her book involve the accusations by some that her book can be seen as a colonizing tool and encourages the support of a war against Iran (Fulford, 2006). It is important to note that she was both a privileged member of society, but also largely educated outside of Iran and predominantly in the United States. During the years she was absent, her country experienced the lead-up to the Revolution that she later criticizes. Her time in the US did not allow her to understand the context of the Revolution, and inevitably affected her political and social outlook.

Marjane Satrapi was born and raised in Iran. She was educated in French from a young age and eventually completed her high school years in Austria. Her parents were vocal resisters of the Shah's regime, and her family had a long history of political involvement. In her memoir she describes her grandfather as once being a member of the government during the Mossadeq administration, but was eventually thrown out during the reign of Reza Shah. Her uncle was eventually put to death for his actions and opposition to the Shah. She currently

lives in Paris where she continues to illustrate and write for various outlets including *The New York Times*.

Satrapi enjoys a great amount of success in the West. Again, being from a privileged family she was able to attend a private school and even get away with talking back to her teachers, despite the fact that other young girls were jailed and even killed for much less. Satrapi's parents, being that they both had political ties, also influenced her in that she was introduced to thinkers like Marx at a young age. This influenced her perception of the Islamic Revolution.

Marina Nemat was born and raised in a middle-class family in Iran. Her situation is unique among the five authors featured in this study because she is the only Christian. While she did not consider herself a rebel, Nemat found it difficult to attend her high school classes after the Islamic Revolution. Instead of the subjects they were supposed to be teaching, Nemat complained that her teachers would preach about the religion of Islam. Eventually she was put on a list of troublemakers and taken to Evin for "questioning." There she was tortured and sentenced to death without even attending the trial. She was saved at the last minute by her prison guard who believed her claims of innocence. He eventually forces her to marry him and she begins a new life as his wife outside the prison, being welcomed into his family and eventually becomes pregnant with his child. Things change again when he is killed in a drive-by shooting with Nemat at his side. The trauma causes her to lose the baby and she is eventually forced back to prison. Her deceased husband's father eventually succeeds in getting her released from prison when she is finally able to go home to her family. She does not tell

them of her experience in prison and they do not ask. She eventually marries the young man she loved before her two years in prison and they move to Canada with their two children. Nemat currently lives in Toronto and goes on speaking tours to talk about her life and her memoir. She has another book about her life scheduled to be published Fall 2010.

Nemat's experiences are inevitably influenced by her perspective of being a Christian in an Islamic state. Not only was she cause for concern because she was outspoken in class, but she was also a Christian, something that comes up time and again in her memoir.

Nelofer Pazira grew up in Afghanistan in a privileged family. While she was not from a family who traditionally had a lot of money, her grandfather was a respected elder in his village and was able to send his son to medical school. When Pazira's father becomes a doctor he is respected within the community and provides a secure life for his family. During the Russian occupation when food was scarce, the Pazira family did not go hungry and Pazira's father felt a fierce loyalty to his country, not wanting to leave until he felt his situation was hopeless. When the family fled they were fortunate enough to share accommodations with family members in Peshawar and eventually in Islamabad. Because of her father's connections and status as a doctor, the family was able immigrate to Canada where they now live.

Again, her story is inevitably influenced by the fact that she was part of a very well-off family, without political ties, but nevertheless privileged because

her father was a doctor. Because of his status and their socio-economic status Pazira was well-educated, which resulted in giving her a sense of agency and feeling of empowerment. However, because *she* felt so free to be who she wanted to be, she is (at first) blind to the plight of her fellow countrywomen and men.

Pazira has been back to Afghanistan and the Afghan border a few times. She currently lives in Toronto and works as a free-lance journalist as well as a human rights activist. Being a journalist she is able to see how the media constructs an image of her country, and dispelling these myths is mainly what drew her to write her memoir.

Malalai Joya was born in a small village in Afghanistan's Farrah province where she lived until she and her family were forced to relocate to refugee camps in both Pakistan and Iran. Her family moved around in an attempt to find camps that offered education for both boys and girls. She eventually begins her career as a teacher in these camps until she is asked by the Organization of Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities, OPAWC, to return to Afghanistan to teach for an organization of underground teachers during the reign of the Taliban. She accepts this dangerous job and she and her family move back to Afghanistan.

She believes in what she does and when the Taliban falls after September 11th, 2001, she makes her voice heard in the Afghan Parliament, eventually being voted in as a member of Parliament, much to the chagrin of the warlords who had filled the now vacant seats in the new government. There she continued to make her voice heard despite numerous attempts to silence her, including many

attempts on her life. She is eventually banished from the government, but continues to work to give a voice to the voiceless in Afghanistan. While she still resides in Afghanistan, despite the danger to her life, she embarks on many speaking tours around the world in an attempt to raise awareness of the situation in Afghanistan. This ability to go back and forth through both the Western world and the East is what makes Joya unique. Because she still lives and works in her home province, she is able to truly assess the situation and relay what she knows to those people overseas who do not know what is really going on in Afghanistan.

The "Man" Behind the Curtain: The publishing industry

Part of my research question outlines the fact that these memoirs have been published in English, by North American publishing houses; it is necessary to note the influence of this on the content of the memoir itself, its intended audience and the voice of the author. As a critical pedagogue it is vital to question who is publishing these memoirs, because these companies hold the power to decide whose story is shared with the public, and whose story is not. As the following paragraphs will discuss, the world of publishing has been changed and affected by our society's current business model that values profit, and nothing else, as the measure of success.

Publishing is a little talked about, yet influential industry. Before the advent of television, radio and the internet, Western society passed on information primarily in the form of the printed word. The Guttenberg Press is widely thought of to be one of the main instruments in the democratization of knowledge. After

its widespread implementation, it held an important role in disseminating knowledge to vast amounts of people through the printing of political pamphlets, treaties and books. In its early days the industry of publishing was the primary way information or new ideas were able to travel to the public.

The memoirs of Andre Schiffrin (2000) provide a very brief introduction to publishing in America. Publishers saw themselves as having an important job; seeking out new authors, new voices and new opinions in foreign cultures, lands, and even languages, was their main focus with the hope of bringing these new ideas back to the American public. In this way different publishing houses were concerned with different themes and functions. Some found their niche in publishing textbooks for schools or trades, while others focused primarily on fiction. Of course, most published authors from many different genres, but simply were known for one in particular. In his memoirs of his career in the publishing industry, Andre Schiffrin (2000) critiques this industry.

Through narration of his own experiences he explains that little by little the many independent publishing houses were swallowed up by bigger and more powerful companies. While these smaller publishing houses, also called "imprints," were at first guaranteed editorial independence, the larger companies inevitably began controlling the way business was conducted and therefore, affected what was published. According to Schiffrin (2000), publishing was once "an intellectually and politically engaged profession" that attempted to balance profits with getting information to the public at any cost (p. 5). Books, novels even, held much more political influence in the past. So much so, they were even

powerful enough to "galvanize public opinion against slavery" (Ibid, p. 8). Now profits are often the only goal. In the wake of this reality, there has been little time or space for seeking out and taking chances on original information or opinions, let alone taking chances on little known, and often dissenting voices. We can see the reality of this today.

There are fewer and fewer *authors* on the bestsellers list. While there are the same number of books, and even more actual lists, it seems like it is always the same names, the established authors we all know. Schiffrin (2000) responds to this: "In recent years publishers have been put on a procrustean bed and made to fit one or two patterns: as purveyors of entertainment or of hard information. This has left little room for books with new, controversial ideas or challenging literary voices" (p. 7). He outlines the statistics as it stood in 2000: "five major conglomerates control 80 percent of American book sales. In 1999, the top twenty publishers accounted for 93 percent of sales, and the ten largest had 75 percent of revenues" (Ibid, p. 2-3). He goes on to discuss the implications of this, namely less and less criticism of big business:

> It is extremely difficult to launch a public discussion critical of large corporations… As a whole the press does not feature detailed investigations of corporate policies in its business pages… with tens of thousands of books on business being published every year, it is remarkable how few feature a careful look at what is really going on, important as this might be for would-be investors, not to speak of workers in the industries themselves or the citizenry as a whole (Ibid, p. 61-62).

What is especially interesting about this memoir is Schiffrin's description of the publishing industry. According to him it was once an industry that prided itself on seeking out and bringing to the public issues that would spark discussions

and debate. Certain publishing houses sole purpose was to explore certain relevant issues. According to Schiffrin (2000) the publishing world was the epicentre, the meeting place of ideas, and publishers had a responsibility to get these ideas to the public. Yet by the 1990s Schiffrin claims we were publishing "only authors who despise themselves for selling out," (Schiffrin, 2000, p. 71).

The five books featured in this study are actually published by three main companies – Random House, Simon & Shuster, and Penguin – each in turn owned by larger parent multi-national corporations. These three are three of the four largest publishing houses in the world.

Reading Lolita in Tehran is published by Random House.

Persepolis is published by Pantheon, an imprint of Random House.

A Prisoner of Tehran is published by Penguin Canada.

A Bed of Red Flowers is published by Vintage, an imprint of Random House.

A Woman Among Warlords by Scribner, an imprint of Simon and Shuster.

The following section will provide a brief overview of the three publishing houses and their respective ownership. I am providing this information because as a critical researcher it is important for me to understand who is publishing the books I wish to study.

Random House

Random House is a perfect example of the transformation of the publishing industry Schiffrin (2000) describes in his memoirs. Established in 1925 by Columbia graduates, Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, Random House quickly made a name for itself when it defended the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Soon it branched out to include children's titles as well as reference books. It began to grow in the 1960s when it acquired the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf Inc., and Pantheon. The multi-media corporation, RCA, then purchased Random House. When it was no longer profitable for RCA, the publishing house was sold to a private billionaire who, as Schiffrin (2000) describes, mismanaged the company by providing inflated bonuses to certain conservative authors and focusing solely on titles that were predicted to sell to a large audience. Although it maintains to this day a policy of editorial independence for the publishing houses acquired (Random House, n.d.), Andre Schiffrin's memoirs provide many examples that imply there are other ways the owning corporation can control what is published in a publishing house. When the main goal of publishing becomes profits, getting interesting ideas, often by unknown authors, becomes next to impossible.

The example of Random House is particularly disturbing since it was recently acquired by Bertelsmann AG, described by Random House as "one of the world's foremost media companies" (Random House, n.d.). The company is privately owned partly by the Bertelsmann Foundation, and partly by the Mohn family, who are associated with the Bertelsmann Foundation. Although the

foundation purports to be a force striving for democracy, it is not without criticism. The Bertelsmann Foundation's express goal is to promote certain social policies that, according to them, contribute to "serving the common good" (Bertelsmann Foundation, n.d.). However, that they own one of the largest media conglomerates in the world implies just how vast their audience is and how many people and the multiple countries they can affect. Their website's tagline is "Inspiring People, Shaping the Future" and they state, "our work is based on the conviction that competition and civic engagement are essential for social progress" (Bertelsmann Foundation, n.d.). While an exhaustive investigation of the Bertelsmann Foundation is beyond the scope of this thesis, as a critical pedagogue, it is important that I ask questions of who is publishing the books in my study. If the owner of a publishing house's express goal is to shape the future, society should be paying more attention to the owners of Bertelsmann AG, and what future they envision.

Penguin

While Penguin Canada is the official publisher of *Prisoner of Tehran*, this company is actually owned by Pearson PLC, another multi-national and multi-media conglomerate that boasts being "the world's leader in educational publishing" (Pearson Education, n.d.). Like the Bertelsmann Foundation's questionable objectivity in influencing social policy, Pearson PLC is also subject to critical questioning. Their business mission is as follows: "Our businesses fuel the growing demand for effective education and high-quality information in the global knowledge economy, and share a common goal: to help people get on in

their lives through education" (Pearson PLC, n.d.). Again, this company holds a great amount of power in the schooling of our students since Pearson PLC owns many of the publishers of textbooks used in North American schools, namely, Addison-Wesley, Prentice Hall, Allyn & Bacon, Benjamin Cummings, among others. It is important to critically question how this company plans to educate through their textbooks.

Simon & Schuster

Scribner's history is similar to many in that it was once a small, family-run publishing house, and is now owned by Simon and Schuster, a publishing house started in 1924 by Richard L. Simon and Lincoln Schuster, which in turn is owned by CBS Corporation, a media conglomerate that owns television, radio, advertising and more publishing companies.

The common element of the stories of these publishing houses is that they are each essentially owned by multi-national corporations that hold vast amounts of power in the distribution of knowledge throughout the world because of the many media companies that each corporation owns. This history is important for teachers because so much of what we are expected to teach comes from textbooks, and, as the previous history explains, the multi-national companies that own the publishing industry have a vested interest in how the books published influence the opinions of the North American public.

I have provided this information about the publishers of the five memoirs in this study because as Schiffrin (2000), implies in his memoir about the

publishing industry, when profits become more important than the content of the books being published, the reader should know who is deciding what the public will consume

Chapter 5: Reading the Word - Themes

This study explored the lived experience of five women from either Iran or Afghanistan as read through the content analysis of their memoirs published in North America. This content analysis produced themes that were present in each of the five memoirs. From detailed notes taken on each of the memoirs, three main issues outlined were: politics, religion and women's issues. These were issues that seemed to dominate the conversation in each of the memoirs. From these three issues I drew sixteen "units of meaning." These units of meaning ranged from "control of women," to "disillusionment," to "backwardness in Muslim society." Arranging these meaning units into groups produced six main themes, one of which includes subthemes. This chapter explains the six main themes and provides examples from each memoir. The following chapter will discuss the significance of these themes in more detail.

Themes:

Theme 1: Past versus present

A common element to the books analyzed within this study was the comparison of the past to the present. Often the books describe a scene, event or characteristic from the past, and immediately juxtapose this with the present reality. The images and descriptions of the past were always fond memories for the authors – happier times, when the authors felt safe. In short, they were positive descriptions. In contrast, the opposing depictions of the present reality were always negatively described.

In *Lolita*, Azar Nafisi (2004) returns to her country after studying in America and finds that Tehran was not the same city she left seven years previous. She often talks about what life was like "before," comparing the previous freedoms to the current isolation and difficulties. She describes how her window once looked out onto the American Hospital, the front lawn often full of happy families and young couples taking advantage of the space for picnics. As Nafisi (2004) states, the hospital was "once small and exclusive, [but] now a noisy, overcrowded medical facility for wounded and disabled veterans of war" (p. 8). The elitism of this comment is thinly veiled as Nafisi disdains the present situation in Iran.

Lolita describes what life is like for the young women of Tehran whose "mother's generation could walk the streets freely, enjoy the company of the opposite sex, join the police force, become pilots, live under laws that were among the most progressive in the world regarding women," (Nafisi, 2004, p. 27). Now they were forced to hide themselves under layers of clothing, lost in the shapeless fabric, and instead of flying planes or aspiring to become members of the government, Iranian women, according to *Lolita*, could only hope to remain under the radar of the next vicious sweep of the Revolutionary Guard.

Similarly *Prisoner of Tehran* (Nemat, 2007) shows the Iran of the past as tolerant of many religions. Nemat describes a time when she, a Christian, and her friend, a Muslim, once prayed together, both accepting of the other's religion:

> "I have to say my prayers before sunset," Arash told me that evening as we sat in his backyard.

> "Can I watch you?"
>
> "You come up with the strangest ideas," he said. But he agreed, and I watched him without saying a word. (Nemat, 2007, p. 72-73).

This passage shows Iran's past was once tolerant of many different religions. Not only could those of different faiths pray together, but Arash eventually became Nemat's first boyfriend, and the first boy she fell in love with. As *Prisoner of Tehran* goes on to show us, this kind of tolerance is unheard of after the Islamic Revolution.

Nemat also reveals that in the past a woman with a mini-skirt could be found next to a woman in a chador and no one would look twice: "This was the time of the Shah and women didn't have to dress according to Islamic Rules" (Nemat, 2007, p. 24). Nemat idealizes the past as a period of religious and cultural freedom. While Iran was once a place where Nemat could fall in love, she eventually feels there is nothing left for her and seeks a home elsewhere.

In *Persepolis*, our young narrator does not have any memories of a time before the revolution. The reader is introduced to her reality with the imposition of the veil and the segregation in her school. While she once attended a co-ed school, after the Islamic Revolution took hold in Iran, the females were quickly segregated from the males. While this seems relatively unimportant, it would be a significant experience for a young girl in middle school and would set a very clear distinction between pre- and post-revolutionary Iran.

Persepolis also depicts the past as filled with heroes and legends, while the present is simply evil images of men and women who do not seem to make sense

to Satrapi. Because she is young, her family members tell her stories of their past. One such story is of her Uncle Anoosh. The chapter describes his heroic escape from Azerbaijan after Iranian soldiers entered the country and executed Anoosh's own uncle, one of the political leaders that had led Azerbaijan to independence from Iran. Satrapi's grandmother also had her own story of heroism. While her husband was in prison because of his political views, she bravely supported her entire family, with very little food and money.

These stories of heroism and bravery from Satrapi's childhood are contrasted against stories from the later years of her life. While the past was filled with heroes, the present was often filled with idleness. At one point Satrapi even laments that her father was not a hero like her uncle. For her the past was glorious, while the present is confusing, and even forgettable.

The stories of the past in *A Bed of Red Flower*s are treated in a similar way. Pazira describes the past as a time of protest, of community, when all Afghans could come together and protest the Russian occupation. When Pazira was a child her images of the fighters in the hills were of heroes, with men fighting in the hills while their women bravely kept the home safe. Similarly, her father's stories of the past were of his political involvement in university. Just before the Communist takeover of the government there was great unrest in Afghanistan and the universities were often the place protests and political discussions took place. Habibullah was in medical school at this time, but was not ignorant to the political unrest in his country. He attended rallies and defended his beliefs with great passion. Similar to Satrapi's image of the present,

the grown Habibullah is idle, and prefers not to be involved, marking for the reader a clear distinction between past and present.

In this study *A Woman Among Warlords* relates to each theme differently from the other five memoirs. Each time Joya's depiction of the theme reflects an alternative perspective from the other five authors. Often she portrays a more holistic perspective in which the reader gets a more complete story. Mostly her writing is concerned with attempting to tell both sides of a story. She treats the theme of Past vs. Present no different.

Instead of looking to the past as the ideal time, or focusing solely on the negativity of the present, Joya remarks that the past was often no better than the present. In contrast to Pazira, Joya is from a poor rural family. While her father was trained in medicine, he was unable to complete his studies because of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Because of this and an injury he endured while fighting against the Soviets, he has never been able to make much money. Therefore, for Joya, there was no idealized time when life was easier because it was always difficult. Instead of focusing on the glories of the past, Joya's memoirs take a clear stance that she and her country must look to the future as a better time. The future is something they should focus on and fight for.

Theme 2a)*: The delegitimization of the Iranian and Afghan governments.*

This theme represents the tendency of the books to portray the government or political leaders (as well as those who follow and support the government) as

unfair, closed-minded, irrational, or even blatantly violent. In *Lolita,* Nafisi's critique of the government often has the effect of reducing its legitimacy. She describes the blind censor as a prime example. After the revolution the censor of theatre, film and television was blind. He would sit in the theatre and have an aid describe the action on stage and from that decide what was inappropriate. When he became film censor, he would have the scriptwriters record the scripts on audiotape. Those who voiced the roles were "forbidden to make them attractive or dramatize them in any way" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 24-25). While this example makes the Iranian government look rather childish and even ridiculous, even more delegitimizing to the government of Iran is the fact that the next censor, although not blind, maintained the same system, suggesting that practices that seem ridiculous are not just the product of a few people in positions of power, but rather, the behaviour is systemic. Nafisi concludes that the Iranian "world under the mullahs' rule was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor" (Nafisi, p. 25). To Nafisi no one could escape this existence because the Iranian government attempted to completely control the lives of its citizens.

In *Bed of Red Flowers*, Pazira (2005) is teaching at a school with rigid rules: "'You're not allowed to discuss religion and politics in any of your classes,' the principal instructs. How can you teach literature and not teach these subjects? I ask. There is no interest in debate or dialogue. 'Just do as you're told," advises Roahafza-jan, another teacher. Silence, silence, silence!" (Pazira, 2005, p. 257). This scene depicts not only the obscene and ludicrous rules of the Islamic government but also the inability of those who do not agree to speak up. By

indicating that those in power under the Islamic leadership do not allow their citizens to ask questions or to even allow something as simple as literature in their classes, Pazira is making the government seem incapable of dealing with dissent, or different views.

In *Persepolis* Satrapi also presents numerous examples that make the Iranian government seem silly, and therefore illegitimate. She does this by calling attention to the many "silly" rules for women put in place after the Islamic Revolution. One such example is a situation that occurred in her art class when the class was supposed to be learning how to draw the human body. Her professor began the class:

> 'I'm your anatomy professor. In the past, we drew nudes, but things have changed. Your model will be covered. Try to make the best of it.'
>
> We tried, we looked…from every direction…and from every angle…but not a single part of her body was visible. We nevertheless learned to draw drapes" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 299).

Satrapi often uses humour in her comments to further delegitimize the rules of her government. When she is found drawing a fully clothed man, the art supervisor questions her,

> "Why are you looking at this man?"
>
> "Well, because I'm drawing him"
>
> "Yes but you're not allowed to look at him. It's against the moral code"
>
> "What would you have me do? Should I draw this man while looking at the door???!!"
>
> "Yes" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 300).

She also tells of when she was stopped by the Revolutionary Guard for running to the bus because her "behind makes movements that are… how do you say… obscene!" To which she responded, "Well then don't look at my ass!" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 301). Despite her tendency to use humour to call attention to these various rules that just do not make sense to a North American audience, her reactions to these rules are that they are not only something to laugh at, but should not be taken seriously. By questioning the rules of the government, she is ultimately questioning the government.

But the examples do become more violence. *Lolita* tells the story of a building that was hit by a bomb during the Iran-Iraq war. When people left their homes to help those who had been injured, the Revolutionary Guard arrived to make sure the victims lay helpless: "The riders all wore black, with red headbands across their foreheads. They started shouting slogans: *Death to America! Death to Saddam! Long Live Khomeini!* People were very quiet… Some tried to help the wounded, but the thugs wouldn't let anyone go near the place" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 211). These followers of the government, self-professed, or government ordered enforcers, are a clear indication that the government of Iran does not have the best interests of its civilians in mind. To most readers, these acts would be unjustifiable.

Nemat also experiences the violent result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Her entire experience is unique when compared to the rest of the memoirs. Nemat experiences extreme violence at a young age solely because of the rules of the Iranian government. She is only 16 when she is arrested, charged and

convicted of crimes against Islam, the entire procedure held behind closed doors and without her knowledge. When the Islamic courts declare a guilty verdict it is nearly impossible to appeal. Nemat is only saved by her prison guard Ali because he quickly falls in love with her and is able to use his contacts to have her sentence reduced from execution to life imprisonment. This story puts the Iranian government in stark contrast to a North American view of a fair trial and the notion of innocent until proven guilty. The North American reader would inevitably see the Iranian government as illegitimate.

In *A Woman Among Warlords* Joya also experiences threats to her life – more than once. She represents the example of what it is like for a person who stands up and says what we, North American readers, probably want to say: why would corrupt men (and some women) be put in charge of a government? But again, it is the way she treats this subject that separates her from the rest of the authors. She is able to look at the big picture, actually discuss the depths of the political involvement of the United States in Afghan politics, and place at least some of the blame on them, not simply focusing on the specific Islamic government.

Theme 2b): The delegitimization of Islam

A second layer of this dense theme is that the delegitimization of the governments of Iran and Afghanistan necessarily critiques the religion of Islam as well. Both Iran and Afghanistan are Islamic States, meaning their laws are based in Islamic law. In Iran the country's religious leader, the Ayatollah, also plays an

important political role. Therefore, when the books present a criticism of the government, it can often lead to the implication that they are also criticizing Islam. For example, in *Lolita*, while Nafisi simply refers to her country as the "Islamic Republic," it is clear she is talking about Iran: "Life in the Islamic Republic...," (Nafisi, 2004, p. 9), "Teaching in the Islamic Republic...," (Nafisi, 2004, p. 10), "The Islamic Republic has coarsened my taste in colors" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 14). By repeatedly referencing Iran solely as "The Islamic Republic," Nafisi emphasizes Iran's Islamic nature, suggesting to the reader that Iran = Islam.

The memoirs also present this theme by referencing many Muslim characters that recognize faults in Islam and question both their religion, and their country's use of religion. In *Lolita* the Muslims girls are often described as unsure of their religion. When talking about one of her students, Nafisi states, "the revolution that imposed the scarf on others did not relieve Mahshid of her loneliness" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 13). Mahshid was a girl who, because of her religious beliefs, chose to wear the scarf before it was made mandatory. Nafisi implies the veil made her feel isolated when no one else was forced to wear it. Now that the rest of the country is forced to wear the head covering, this comment suggests it is her religion that makes Mahshid feel isolated. This same girl claims that "Now that my religion is in power, I feel more helpless than ever before, and more alienated" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 327). One of the only Muslim characters in the book questions her faith and suggests to the reader that even a practicing Muslim cannot legitimize the religion of Islam.

Lolita goes on to claim that those same people who once railed against the Western literature that Nafisi loved to teach in class were now, after the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war, looking to Western philosophy for direction and hope. In fact, it is the Muslim girls who point out that the government simply uses religion as a political tool to get what it wants: the government bends the rules when it needs to, lets certain people get away with certain things at certain times, while it makes examples out of others. The girls understand that religion is a business for the government, "like oil for Texaco" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 275). The book makes it clear to the reader that religion is how the government maintains power and control over the people of Iran.

A Bed of Red Flowers also depicts Muslims who question their religion. Pazira's father once equated Shi'a Islam with a resistance movement. The grown Habibullah details the "cultural backwardness" of his country and places the blame on "failed leadership, on self-serving kings who either brutally abused ordinary people with extreme reform projects or totally ignored them" (Pazira, 2005, p. 48). Although he still qualifies himself as a Muslim, he no longer aligns himself with the resistance movement within the Shiite religion. If he, a strong, male voice that Pazira values and respects, cannot respect the religion that he was raised to practice, how are we, the reader, expected to see Islam as a legitimate religion?

While the Muslims in *Persepolis* do not necessarily question their faith, there is nevertheless a delegitimization of the religion due largely to the reactions of Satrapi's family members to the Muslims in the story. Religion in general is

not discussed in great esteem; Satrapi's family do not seem to practice any religion, and Satrapi's own "conversations" with God are treated mostly as a child's fantasy. As she gets older, God disappears, and if he does appear it is only when she is in great need or feels scared.

While the memoir does not depict any member of her family practicing any kind of religion, her mother does criticize their neighbours for their "born again" displays of Islamic practice, donning a chador and veil even before it was made mandatory. Satrapi's mother is a role model to the young girl and these comments affect the way she acts in school. Taking her mother's advice to lie about her religious practice Satrapi (2003) comments, "At first, it was a little hard, but I learned quickly" (p. 75). Again, because both Satrapi and the important figures in her life do not value the religion, and in fact treat Islam at the very least as a nuisance but mostly as something to fear, the reader in turn does not form a good impression of the religion.

In contrast to the depictions of Muslims who question their faith, in *Prisoner of Tehran*, Nemat's faith in her Christian God never waivers. She believes that her God got her through her difficult ordeal. On numerous occasions she turns to God: "God will help me through," (Nemat, 2007, p. 114); "I thought of the church constantly. I could smell the candles burning in front of the image of the Virgin," (Nemat, 2007, p. 115); "I got on the bus, found a quiet seat in a corner, and prayed. Was there anything else to do?" (Nemat, 2007, p. 102). Because the other memoirs analyzed in this study depict Islam in a way that suggests the faith is not strong, or depict Muslims who question their faith, the

representation of Nemat as completely devoted to her faith, despite facing death, suggests that Islam is not a religion that will assist you in times of need, while Christianity will provide you with assistance. The implication therefore suggests that Christianity is a worthy religion, while Islam is not.

Interestingly, *A Woman Among Warlords* does not discuss religion in a personal or passionate way. Joya often does not mention her own practice, but the reader does not get the impression that she does not practice. Instead, she treats Islam like she would treat any other religion. Her one powerful reference to religion is when an Afghan soldier gave her his copy of the Quran to protect her when her life was in danger after her outburst at the Loya Jirga. In that exchange he told her "if you hold this, it will keep you safe" (Joya, 2009, p. 74). She does not, however, make the religion of Islam central to her critique of the Afghan government.

Theme 3: Christianity versus Islam

Although this theme is found most explicitly in *Prisoner of Tehran*, it is still an important exploration of the tensions between Islam and the West. The conversations Nemat has with Ali are evidence of this tension. She does not believe in the violence he thinks is necessary. He believes that "most of them brought it upon themselves" (Nemat, 2007, p. 225), referring to the prisoners in Evin, some of whom Ali himself tortured and even killed. Nemat's response is that only God can judge who lives and who dies. However, Ali claims that it is his job to "protect Islam, God's law and God's people from the evil forces that are

at work against them" (Ibid, p. 194). Ali raises the question, if you are killing in the name of God, does it make it right? However this raises more questions, whose God is the right God to kill for? Ali goes on to explain his actions, asking, "if someone holds a gun to your head and you get a chance to shoot and defend yourself, will you do it or will you die without fighting back?" (Ibid, p. 226). Nemat's response is that, no matter what the circumstance, she will not take another life. Nemat's response to this question and her actions throughout the book leave the reader at times feeling like they are reading a book depicting the life of a saint and one cannot help but feel that Christian values are at odds with Muslim values.

Interestingly, while her family does not appear to practice any particular religion, Satrapi chooses to depict her image of God as a white man with a beard, alarmingly similar to a North American Christian's image of God the Father. Despite the fact that Christianity is never mentioned in the memoir, the reader nevertheless is faced with the image of a Christian God during the first half of the story when the young Satrapi has her night time conversations with God. This large, white-bearded, white man is Satrapi's protector when the changes in Iran scare her and no one else can make sense of it for her: "I didn't know what justice was. Now that the revolution was finally over once and for all... the only place I felt safe was in the arms of my friend [God]" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 53). Using the Christian image of God to comfort the scared Satrapi in the face of the newly formed Islamic government presents to the reader a clear opposition between

Islam and Christianity: while one is harsh and scary, the other is warm and comforting.

A Bed of Red Flowers does not make much mention of a separation between Christianity and Islam, but Pazira does mention the fact that the members of the militant mujahidin in Pakistan often could not read the Quran, marking a difference between Christianity and Islam. To a North American reader it would be ridiculous to imagine that a Christian could not read the Bible, especially if that Christian was preaching to others. What Pazira does not mentioned is that the Quran is written in Arabic and all Muslims, even those who do not speak Arabic, are expected to memorize the Arabic version of Quran through repetition, which often sounds like chanting, almost like song. Therefore, even Muslims in Pakistan who probably speak Urdu, or those in Afghanistan who may speak Pashto, would probably be able to recite at least some sections of the Quran in Arabic. It is a part of the culture of the religion to memorize these songs or chants. Verses and meanings are explained by Imams or religious leaders. Much like the way the teachings of Christ were passed on through priests and monks. Whether or not this process is just or should be cause for concern is of course not the focus of this paper, but that there is no mention of this common practice is concerning because it places such a disconnect between the North Americans reading this memoir, and the Muslim characters, especially when those reading are Christian.

Lolita's references to Christianity are not quite so obvious, but she does hold Christian values to a certain standard since so many of the books she

discusses are written by Christian authors. This is especially true when talking about Jane Austen's books. While Nafisi focuses her discussion of these books on the various customs of Austen's 19th century British society, the virtuous qualities that characterize this society are deeply entrenched in Christian assumptions and beliefs. Topics such as marriage, a common topic for Austen, are told strictly from a Christian perspective. She talks of Austen's "muted sensuality, desire by indirection," or how passion "emerges even in [the characters'] mundane interactions" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 305). Nafisi seems to hold these values in high esteem and sees a connection between women in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Austen's heroines.

She is constantly comparing and contrasting the girls she teaches with the values she derives from Austen's books. Because so much of the storyline in Austen's books is based on Christian values and a Christian-based society, it is problematic because this puts Christianity in direct opposition to Islam. Iran is not a Christian society and Nafisi's comments make this quite clear. While she claims the best way she can describe the social workings of Austen's books as carefully planned and practiced dance, when she compares this to a traditional Persian dance she finds she cannot even find an English word that properly describes the "*coquettishness, teasing, flirtatiousness*" of this dance. Even when Nafisi resorts to metaphors for the two cultures, Islamic and Christian traditions are do not seem to be able to translate to the other's language.

Theme 4: Negative portrayals of Muslims.

Unfortunately throughout these memoirs there are a number of highly negative depictions of Muslims. Muslims are characterized by a number of mostly negative traits, ranging from irrational, cold, indifferent, and unfriendly to less extreme, but nevertheless negative traits like naive, silly, and immature.

While *Lolita* does not have many Muslim characters, the few ones are typically depicted as cold and irrational. In one case the girls in her class begin to argue about a political issue, quickly dividing down religious lines, those who are practicing Muslims on one side, and those who do not practice any religion on the other. These religious women in the class seem to stick together, quite content to reject those women they deem unsuitable. Nafisi describes them as cold, indifferent to any attempts at friendship, and one woman in particular, Mahshid, she describes as "a formidable enemy" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 55). Conversely, the opposing secular women she sympathizes with, defending the outbursts of one of the girls as a response to the fact that her efforts at friendship had been rejected, even describing this particular girl as "defenceless" against another more religious woman (Nafisi, 2004 p. 52, 55).

The men who do not look Nafisi in the eye are likewise subject to her reproaches, even if they are pleasant toward her in every other way. She describes her potential employer, a "truly Muslim man" as a "shy eighteen-year-old," and goes on to describe the great lengths he takes to avoid her eyes, playing with his pen, "looking at it intently" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 183). In response she describes her

frustration at this "awkward situation" and remarks that it must have been painful and embarrassing for him (Nafisi, 2004, p. 184). The way Nafisi separates the religious from non-religious characters presents the reader with a clear set of characteristics for what they can expect of Muslims: either cold and indifferent, or embarrassingly awkward. Either way the result is a negative impression of Muslims.

Muslim characters are also depicted in an extreme way, at times almost villainous. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi illustrates the Muslim male and female characters in exactly the same manner every time they appear in her drawings: men wear low hats, with sunglasses and moustaches that cover their faces, and women are covered head-to-toe, with only their eyes, noses and mouths visible (Satrapi, 2003, p. 4, 5, 75, 133). Not only were the images of Muslims always the same, but the men and women Satrapi and members of her family encountered on the street were invariably nasty, often judging Satrapi or her mother for their choice in clothing, for wearing lipstick, or even for running. This constant depiction of Muslims as similarly dressed, and invariably mean suggests to the reader that all Muslims look and/or act in this way.

In *Prisoner of Tehran,* the depiction of Muslim characters ranges. Ali's sister and mother are quiet and submissive, while the female guards in prison, as well as the female teachers at Nemat's school are severe and mean. One prison guard, Hamehd, represents the West's interpretation of the typical evil Muslim fundamentalist – a mean, scary, hard-liner, with no room for compromise. Although he is not a developed character, the reader comes to know him well

because he keeps reappearing, featured as Nemat's nemesis as well as a foil to Ali, the other prison guard and Nemat's future husband. When she first meets the two of them at Evin, they present a "good cop/bad cop" situation. Ali tries to get her to talk while Hamehd simply takes pleasure in torturing her.

In contrast, Mr. Moosavi, Ali's father, is presented as a typical "good" Muslim man because he follows the laws of Islam and tries to be good to all people. He is able to be good because other people are doing "what's right" the hard way; which is to say, other people must use violence to suppress opposition so people like Mr. Moosavi can simply live in a proper Islamic manner in peace. He is very much like the Western patriarch, except with a Muslim rulebook. His wife, daughter and son are obedient to him, but he also listens to his son and respects his decisions. In light of the overwhelming abundance of negative depictions of Muslim characters, it is almost as if Mr. Moosavi represents the possibility that there are good Muslim men, an anti-thesis to the rest of the characters. However, despite his family's good relations with certain religious leaders, he is unable to bring his son's killers to justice, and must fight to continue to assist Nemat in Ali's name after his death. It seems that after the family loses a son who was a Revolutionary Guard, they also lose some of their influence in society.

Finally, Ali, Nemat's first husband and prison guard, is the most complicated, layered and perhaps the most human of all the characters. In him we see someone conflicted and torn, strong and sure, yet hesitant and able to change his mind, and admit fault. He is both a tyrant to Nemat and a saviour, and for that

reason, the fact that she herself cannot quite condemn him nor can she forgive him. This dichotomy produces a tension for the reader as well. Thus, the Muslim characters in *Prisoner of Tehran* are depicted in an overwhelmingly negative fashion.

A Bed of Red Flowers also has its share of negative portrayals of Muslim characters. While the majority of main characters in Pazira's life, many of which were Muslims, were not depicted in a negative way, there were many negative depictions of the Muslims she meets once leaving Afghanistan. In fact, it is almost immediate. On the ride out of Afghanistan, after two weeks in hiding and on the run in her country, she meets members of the mujahidin who travel back and forth along the Afghan/Pakistan border. These men are her first experience with the Muslims outside of Afghanistan, fighting for her "freedom." Immediately she feels at odds with them. They congratulate each other on the destruction they caused in the capital city. These are clearly not the Muslims she is used to in her own country, and are not the romanticized fighters she dreamt up while fighting for their cause when she lived in Kabul.

The negative portrayals continue and increase exponentially once Pazira and her family arrive in Peshawar, and even in the more "open" Islamabad. In these cities in Pakistan Pazira encounters men who question her choice of clothing, insult her for not covering her head in public, and even threaten her life. These men are depicted as violent and ignorant, simply closed-minded. They are people Pazira cannot connect with, people that even her father cannot reason with, and as Pazira sees, he is even scared of what they could do to her. In one situation

a man on the street accuses Pazira of wearing inappropriate clothing, "a Pakistani-style shalwar kameez." Her father simply agrees with the man, leaving Pazira feeling cheated. When she later accuses her father of being "scared to go to his stupid committee," he corrects her: "No, I was afraid he'd shoot you or worse" (Pazira, 2005, p. 248-9). Pazira's depictions of these Muslim men display solely negative images of the Muslims outside of Afghanistan. Pazira and her family feel so out of place in this hyper-Islamist society that they flee to Canada, feeling uprooting their lives to move to a completely foreign country is their only option.

A Woman Among Warlords also displays certain Muslim characters in a negative way. The men in power in her country are often Joya's enemies and therefore are read as despicable characters who often use their religion to denounce Joya. There is a difference between how Joya treats these Muslim characters and how the other authors treat the Muslim characters in their stories. Joya makes it clear that these characteristics are not inherent in all Muslims. Instead, she often contextualizes each situation, and even shows the other side of the story. The corruption and violence that the other memoirs seem to suggest is inherent to Muslim characters and governments instead have other factors that contribute: often the negative behaviour is politically motivated and influenced by a corrupt government.

She explains how even those Muslims who have been fooled by the corrupt government, are capable of changing their minds, once informed of the truth. When a crowd of angry men swarm the orphanage where Joya works they are fought off by the men and women who work and live near the building. Those

men and women knew how much good Joya did in this building. When Joya asks the angry men why they decided to do this, she finds out they were told by a member of the government that Joya was hording money and valuables there, and not sharing with the community. They rioted because they were told they could keep any valuables they looted. When they realized they were lied to, the angry men immediately felt ashamed for their actions. This example in which Joya follows a story to its completion shows the difference between how she depicts Muslims and how the rest of the authors depict Muslims. She is willing to tell the entire story, because she knows there are often specific reasons people do the things they do, and they are often misinformed.

She also shows many positive images of Muslims, in which they are depicted as resisting the propaganda and influence of the corrupt members of the Afghan government. For example, many men and women from the countryside tell Joya that they believe she is a true representative of Muslim values, despite what the warlords try to say about her in Parliament or the news.

Joya's depictions of Muslims show a wide range of characteristics, so that North American readers do not only have negative images of Muslim characters.

Theme 5: Freedom of women

A common thread throughout these books is the suggestion that women in Islamic countries are not free. Within this theme there were many examples of women being controlled by men. In *Lolita*, this theme is mostly evident through descriptions of the girls in Nafisi's class. Sanaz, a student in her class, encounters

problems with her brother trying to control her every move, using her car like it is his, and being excused for his behaviour because he is a male (Nafisi, 2004). Another student, Yassi, has an uncle in America who seems to support Yassi and apparently has a very progressive view of women. Living in America, he naturally shares the West's progressive views on women. Yet still he asserts his masculine control over her without her even realizing what he is doing (Nafisi, p. 270).

Lolita also places a great emphasis on how women present themselves in public and in private. Nafisi always takes time to describe how each of her girls looks beneath her chador. To her, their personalities are apparent through their dress: "each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 4). Like their dress, the girls' hair was also important. Certain styles were "more European than Iranian," some were "meticulously styled" while others were "untidy" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 12). Yet that was the way they looked inside the safety of Nafisi's apartment. The way the girls wear their veils is perhaps the most important part because that is how they look to the outside world. Most girls in *Lolita* quickly threw off their scarves upon their arrival at Nafisi's apartment, and in the subsequent descriptions their personalities come to life. Because they can only take off their scarves indoors and with other women they trust, these women are not free to be themselves in public. Mahshid, one of the only Muslim girls, wore her scarf even inside. In her description of Mahshid, Nafisi felt the black scarf "clashe[d] with her delicate features" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 4). Meanwhile Yassi, a much more relaxed person, and a much more relaxed

Muslim, wore the scarf casually, allowing her hair to peep out. Even how these women wear their head scarves is important. According to Nafisi, the women who feel more comfortable letting their hair show are happier and more free.

Persepolis presents the reader with a few strong female characters. Satrapi's mother and grandmother are two women who stand up for what they believe in and are portrayed as being equals in their marriages. Nevertheless, Satrapi's mother is harassed, and even Satrapi herself gets harassed by female guards who disapprove of her clothing. Although she herself does not get into any real danger, her parents worry enough to send her out of the country to complete her studies. Despite her inherent strength she still is not able to conduct herself as she pleases until she leaves the country. It is during this time she is able to truly explore her own identity and what it means to be a female through different styles of clothing or hairstyles and jewellery: "I tried a few new haircuts. A little snip of the scissors on the left. And a week later, a little snip of the scissors on the right. I looked like Cosette in 'Les Miserables.' So I coated my hair with gel, I added a thick line of eyeliner, a few safety pins, which were replaced by a scarf. It softened the look." (Satrapi, 2003, p. 190). She has her first boyfriend and her first sexual experiences. Subsequently on her return to Iran she is chastised by those she once called her friends for having those experiences, appalled that she would do such things. Their response when she admits that she had a few sexual experiences was, "What's the difference between you and a whore???" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 270). While these same girls wear designer clothing from the West under their chadors and secretly wear blush and

mascara under their veils, they nevertheless maintain a certain idea of what is morally right and wrong for a woman – Satrapi having crossed that line could no longer continue in their social circle – good Iranian women just could not do those things, "To them, I had become a decadent Western woman." (Satrapi, 2003, p. 270).

In *Prisoner of Tehran* Nemat makes one specific reference to the difference between Muslim women and Christian women. When she is arrested and questioned in Evin she surprises the guard with her bold answers remarking: "He probably had expected me to be like most Muslim girls from traditional families – quiet, shy, and submissive – but I didn't have any of these qualities" (Nemat, 2007, p. 13). For the rest of the book in fact, Nemat is often characterized in contrast to the other Muslim women. She is one of the strongest girls in her cell in Evin which she shares entirely with Muslim girls. She is also very different from Ali's sister and mother. They are just as she describes Muslim girls: quiet and submissive. They obey Mr. Moosavi quietly, confident that he knows what is best. Despite how strong Nemat presents herself in this book, she still maintains the image that a Muslim man will control you. No matter how much she tries, she is controlled by the Muslim men in her society. Even when she marries her Christian husband, a marriage which was seriously discouraged by her ex-father-in-law and an unknown male Evin prison guard, she does not feel free. Instead she feels she must leave Iran and go to Canada to be able to truly be free. Nemat states, in Iran, "there was no future" for her family, and she leaves with finality: "There was no return for us" (Nemat, 2007, p. 272). The finality of

her departure, and the many obstacles she had to go through to leave reflects the extent to which she feels she cannot truly live in Iran. She states in the Epilogue to the memoir that she knew that in Canada she "would be free and feel safe," and it was where she would finally "belong" (Ibid, p. 274). This is a strong statement to make when leaving the only country you have ever known. Her implication is that Iran is so stifling a place for her that even a foreign country is preferable.

In *Bed of Red Flowers* Pazira also experiences being controlled by men. Her uncle, who recently converted to Islam, asks her, "'Do you always dress like this?... *Istaghfour – Allah* [God forgive us]…You should know that it's not *mohram* [lawful] even for your father to see your bare legs, your hair; it is all *haram* [forbidden] in Islam'" (Pazira, 2005, p. 162-163). She is also harassed by a stranger on the street in Peshawar, "We've been fighting a holy war, spilling out blood – but not for this, not for our women to be dressed like this" (Ibid, p. 248). Like Nemat, Pazira and her family first leave Peshawar, and eventually leave Pakistan entirely for a better life in Canada. Pazira states: "I am not going to live under these conditions... I cannot bear the thought of being locked up behind the walls of a house" (Ibid, p. 244). To Pazira and her family, even a cold foreign land would be preferable to this loss of freedom.

In contrast, Joya's story in *A Woman Among Warlords* describes a different reality for women. Joya takes time to continuously point out how many women speak out against their government, or even organize to help themselves in spite of their government. Joya joins these organizations as a young teenager and benefits from their efforts to educate young women. The Revolutionary

Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) is such a group, founded by a woman named Meena who was later assassinated because of her efforts. During her life, and after her death, Meena was a hero to Joya. Joya eventually joins the ranks of women who are trying to change Afghanistan from the bottom up and becomes a teacher, assisting her family with much needed income.

Another group, Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (OPAWC), supports a network of underground teachers for women who want to learn to read and write, despite the consequences: "their main focus would be to improve educational opportunities for women, and they were looking for volunteers. These OPAWC leaders convinced me to join their cause… I believed in OPAWC's goals" (Joya, 2009, p. 34). Although it was difficult to establish herself at first, Joya is able to convince both the religious fathers and the fearful women that it was important for women to be educated, and to be educated by a fellow Afghan. She tells her neighbours to visit her at school and this encouraged them to attend her classes: "Perhaps this was a bit mischievous of me, but I also thought it might be a way to get more students into my classes. And it worked" (Joya, 2009, p. 42). These examples provide contrast and positive examples of women in Afghanistan that can be relayed to other Muslim women in the world. Joya suggests that not all women are victims in Islamic regimes, and presents to the reader the evidence that some Muslim women choose to find ways to bring a better, freer life to their country. These examples are important to include because Joya's actions, and the actions of RAWA and OPAWC, are the anti-thesis of the North American view of Muslim women.

Theme 6: The continued miseducation of the West

Because these books are memoirs, they deal almost entirely with events that have been documented in the news and in history books. This theme deals with the authors' inability to contextualize or provide background information on certain historical events that these memoirs discuss throughout their storylines. The books often do not connect what is happening in the present to the problems of the past. The books set in Iran describe the present Islamic State in a way that seems disconnected from any historical context. Nafisi states: "A stern ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher-king, had come to rule our land" and while she mentions "a past," it is not the recent past: "He had come in the name of a past, a past that, he claimed, had been stolen from him. And now he wanted to re-create us in the image of that illusory past" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 28). As the previous chapters note, Nafisi is missing a large portion of the story in her rendition of why Khomeini returned to Iran, and why he was exiled in the first place.

While Nafisi does admit she protested the Shah's government while attending college in the US, she does not relate the entire story of US involvement's with the imposition of the Shah, the training of his secret police (SAVAK), and the ousting of the democratically elected Mossadeq. By not including this information she is contributing to the silencing of this history, a key factor in explaining why America and Iran are at such political odds, even today.

Prisoner of Tehran also does not explain the history of Iran. When Nemat claims: "This was the time of the Shah and women didn't have to dress according

to Islamic Rules," (Nemat, 2007, p. 24), she fails to explain to the reader that during the time of the Shah's reign in Iran, women were forced to unveil, despite their religious beliefs, and many dissenters were oppressed by the Shah's security service, SAVAK. Instead, the way Nemat describes it, Iran during the time of the Shah was a free and tolerant country, a fact which is anything but true.

Although *Persepolis* does include some of this history, Satrapi fails to mention any US involvement in replacing Prime Minister Mossadeq with the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. While Satrapi does share some of the history in which Britain influenced the tyrannical rule of the Shah, she lacks a complete story. She only refers to British involvement in the 1953 coup which saw Mossadeq ousted and Reza Shah implanted as dictator. As stated above, the American CIA played a large role in this military operation. They were known to have operatives in Iran working to scare and delegitimize the Mossadeq government. This US involvement is completely erased from Satrapi's description of this historical event, which again contributes to the lack of knowledge of the North American public about how or why Iran and America are political enemies.

Unlike the previous three authors, Pazira describes in her memoirs her return to Afghanistan after fleeing to Canada. Because of this Pazira is actually able to dispel some of the myths put forth in the North American media about Afghanistan. According to Pazira's conversations with people she meets, the citizens of Afghanistan just want peace, and they are not happy with the current, US-backed government: "We want an Afghanistan free of war, under the

leadership of one central government, where there are no warlords" (Pazira, p. 343). These warlords who once wrecked havoc on their own people are now the country's pardoned leaders, and prefer to be called "diplomats." General Abdul Rashid Dostum is one such man. Now a government official, he meets on friendly terms with organizations such as The Red Cross, the United Nations, and American security teams, despite being accused of such atrocious war crimes as kidnapping, raping, and murdering thousands of women during the civil war, as well as "suffocating one thousand Taliban prisoners in shipping containers in 2001" (Pazira, p. 345). By exposing this truth to her readers she is beginning to break down the wall of silence between those still living in war-torn countries like Afghanistan, and those who fled these countries long ago and criticize from the relative safety of exile. However, she is only able to do this, to express this side of the story by actually going back to Afghanistan herself.

Similarly, because she is the only author from this study who actually still lives and works in her home country, Joya has the unique ability to explain her country as it is now from the perspective of an insider because she is literally living it, and not as a foreigner. Joya calls out her government and explains the context of her critiques. She contextualizes the present situation in Afghanistan in the first chapter of her memoir, providing a brief outline of the history of invaders of Afghanistan. Joya also takes the time to explain to the reader from the very beginning that there are actually two different sides to the mujahidin. She separates the fighters into two categories, the "good" mujahidin and the "criminal" mujahidin. She explains that while certain sects of the mujahidin do

eventually take over Afghanistan after the Soviets leave and end up warring on the citizens of their own country in a civil war, there was another group of mostly men, but also the women who supported them, who simply fought to free their country from foreign rule and did not seek personal gain.

She continuously explains the history and questions the hypocrisy, claiming that the US once backed, armed, and funded militant Islamist groups to fight against the Soviets – apparently the fact that they oppressed women then was not as important as it is now. She addresses this in the statement: "Even though it was supposedly illegal for militia leaders or combatants to run for office, a Human Rights Watch report exposed that 60 percent of the new parliamentarians were either warlords or their allies. Many of these people either stole their places in Parliament at gunpoint or bought their seats with US dollars – which they had in abundance because leaders of the Northern Alliance were paid with cash by the CIA for their support of the U.S. war" (Joya, 2009, p. 124). This is an important truth that should be widely known by a public who is paying for a war that has made a few Afghans rich, while the rest remain poor and in danger of becoming collateral damage in a war they wish would end.

Joya feels she must present these truths since there have been many books written about her country since 9/11, but "only a few of them offer a complete and realistic picture of the country's past" (Joya, p. 3). While they describe the horrors of the Taliban's rule, most of these books fail to make clear the equally horrible rule of the mujahidin immediately preceding the Taliban and that these men now make up the US-backed government in Afghanistan. This memoir is

different because Malalai Joya sets out from the very beginning of her memoir to tell the most honest story she possibly can because she knows "the truth about Afghanistan has been hidden behind a smoke screen of words and images carefully crafted by the United States and its NATO allies and repeated without question by the Western media" (Joya, 2009, p. 1-2). This is a comment that the other authors seem unwillingly to say.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarized six core themes that span the five memoirs. While this chapter dealt entirely with the memoirs and the authors of the memoirs, the following chapter will discuss the implications of the six themes and will answer the question, how do these memoirs influence North American perceptions of Muslims/Islam?

Chapter 6: Reading the World - Discussion

In this study, most of the books dealt with themes that negatively portrayed Islam and Islamic States. Most representations of present life in Iran and Afghanistan were negative, portraying leadership as irrational, closed-minded, or violent, and often the books looked toward the past as an ideal time. Muslim characters were presented in similar ways: irrational, cold, and unfriendly. Female characters in these memoirs are victimized and because of the Islamic rules of the countries, their freedom is greatly limited. While most of the memoirs remained silent on key historical information that would serve to contextualize the current political situations, two of the five, by exposing their truths, were able to present a more holistic picture of life in Iran or Afghanistan. These books also present their reasoning regarding why life in these countries is this way. I will now present the implications of the six themes, providing a discussion of my research question, how do these memoirs influence North American perspectives of Muslims/Islam?

Theme 1: Past versus Present

The overall implication of the depictions of both present and past is that, especially in Iran, the past was idealized, something that the authors and their characters look back on longingly because the present situation is so horrible. This theme plays into Sensoy's (2009) findings that focused on the representations of Muslims in textbooks. She states, "according to these textbooks, Muslims live in the past. At least their 'best' is in the past" (p. 75).

The height of Muslim civilization is depicted in the textbooks studied as a time when Muslims were scholars, in academic settings, or at the forefront of ancient society. The images of Muslims in present day are predominantly in religious and rural settings. The suggestion is that the Islamic culture is no longer the strong intellectual force it was in the past because of its tendency to rely on religion for its direction. Sensoy (2009) goes on to describe that this privileging of the past often "dilutes" a difficult and complex history. Islam is not a homogenous religion and there are tensions among followers. But often an image of "a homogenous Islamic worldview is cultivated" (p. 81). In these depictions and representations, there are often many silenced aspects of Islam.

The actions of the authors of the five memoirs studied mimic Sensoy's findings, by only focusing on the past as a time when Islam was at its best. With the exception of Joya's memoir, the memoirs in this study constantly looked towards the past as an ideal time. This act contributes to a North American assumption of Islam that sees all Muslims as backward and against modernity. Because the authors themselves do not value the present situation of their countries, indeed they are highly critical of Iran and Afghanistan, the North American reader is led to believe that these countries require assistance to "bring them back" to a better time.

A story like *A Woman Among Warlords* is important because it depicts Afghanistan as simply a nation with political problems, not just another Islamic

State full of terrorists[1]. Joya makes it clear that it is not inherent in Islam to oppress women, and that many people support her cause, the support she has is proof of this. She does not look to Afghanistan's past as an ideal time, nor do the characters in her story. By focusing on the present, and all its problems, as well as looking towards the future with hope and possibility, Joya clearly emphasizes an alternative to the traditional North American interpretation, and provides a way to counteract the misrepresentations inherent to Islamophobia, that so dominates the Western view of Islam. As Sensoy & Stonebanks (2009) remark in the Introduction to *Muslim Voices in Schools*, sometimes we require an alternative to the one-sided discussion of Islam and Islamic countries. Like the people themselves, the discussion of Muslims and the Islamic religion should be diverse, and Sensoy & Stonebanks (2009) advocate the use of counter-narratives, stories that "push back against the reductive mainstream 'stories' that have been told about [Muslims] for generations if not centuries" (p. x-xi). The result of which is an alternative perspective that can be used to question the current assumptions about Muslims and Islam.

Theme 2a): The delegitimization of the Iranian and Afghan governments

The implication of the memoirs' descriptions and stories about the Iranian and Afghan governments is that the governments of these countries are backward and virtually oppose modernity itself. The governments are not only viewed as backward, but in some cases, like the case of the blind censor, completely out of

[1] See comments made by Hillary Clinton in which she claimed that Iran was "the largest supporter of terrorism in the world" (democracynow.org, 2010).

touch with "reality." I use quotations here because reality is a notion that can be debated. There are many "realities" and one persons' reality may be completely unlike another persons' reality (Blundo & Greene, 1991). Therefore two people can have different standards of what they consider normal. However, the authors continuously delegitimize their governments by suggesting that the actions of members of government, or certain rules or laws are not normal. Each example of a ridiculous law or image of a naive, immature or even violent follower contributes to the overall interpretation that the governments of Iran and Afghanistan should not be taken seriously.

Ali Khan (2009) reminds us that in the face of the two very public wars being waged in Islamic countries, and a growing resentment towards Muslims in North America (for example, the opposition to the "Ground Zero" mosque, or Hérouxville, Quebec's controversial immigrant code), "the restrictive conception of an Islamic 'other' appears to have resurfaced with a vengeance. As the world divides into 'us or them' individuals are assigned belonging to one or the other category" (p. 154). Unfortunately when we do not hear the voice of the "other," the dominant "us" is able to not only create, but also preserve the identity of the "other" (Stonebanks, 2004). By continuously denouncing the governments of Iran and Afghanistan, these books are contributing to a negative image of Islamic governments. Without a positive image, or even an opposing voice from these Islamic regimes, the North American public is given a biased, one-sided view. This bulk of narrow-minded literature then becomes another contribution to the growing canon of Anti-Islamic text, which, as Orientalism posits, becomes a part

of a "system of ideas" (Said, 2001, p. 1995), that in turn informs the public about Islam and Islamic countries.

Theme 2b): The delegitimization of Islam

The criticism of the Muslim religion is concerning because it again implies the religion is backward, or does not have a place in the modern world. The further rejection of Islam by even practicing Muslims suggests that even those who believe in the words of the prophet Mohammed cannot reconcile the actions of the Muslim rulers in these two Islamic countries. The reactions of the various characters to the new government in Iran, for example, suggest they have underestimated the power of political Islam. As Kincheloe (2004) points out, in the build-up to the Iranian revolution of the 1970s many people were too "obsessed with American geopolitical interests and Western modes of analysis... [to see] the important story emerging right before their eyes: the rise of political Islam" (p. 60). In doing this, the books refuse to legitimize the fact that political Islam was and is a very real force in many Islamic states. Instead, the book sets up a clear distinction between the people who support the regime, who only seem to be the Revolutionary Guards and extremely religious people, and everyone else. As Skalli (2004) postulates, the colonial project in the Middle East left the religious with a feeling that in order to modernize, they would necessarily lose their religion. Perhaps modernity brought about by US-backed dictators was not sustainable in a country that was still fiercely religious. Perhaps a country will seek modernity in a process that sees the country gradually made secular over generations of people becoming dissatisfied with their religious rulers, as was the

case in much of the Western world. Perhaps this kind of forced modernity, while welcomed by some, those educated and rich enough to travel to other countries and be educated there, was destined to have some kind of backlash by those who felt their religion was being stolen from them and vilified unjustly. Of the memoirs set in Iran, the authors' accounts of the Islamic regimes do not leave room for the reader to come to this kind of conclusion. Through the depictions of the government of Iran and its followers, the only conclusion the reader can come to is that its Islamic leaders are extreme religious fanatics who have no basis in the modern world.

When contrasted with Nemat who is Christian, when even in the face of death never questions her faith, *Lolita*'s frequent depictions of Muslims who do question their faith, leads to further criticism of the Muslim religion. While I do not wish to critique Nemat's devotion to Christianity, my concern is that this situation might suggest that Nemat was saved from death because she was Christian, thereby leading to a further demonizing of the Muslim religion. Why do the rest of Nemat's friends perish within the walls of Evin, while Nemat is able to leave the prison (albeit still under house arrest)? Did the rest deserve it? My concern is that this perspective is a dangerous contribution to the current Islamophobic views of Muslims because it suggests that Christians are more faithful and more worthy of being saved that Muslims.

Theme 3: Christianity versus Islam

In *Prisoner of Tehran*, Nemat and Ali cannot come to an understanding because of their commitments to their different religious backgrounds – in Nemat's understanding of Christianity it is wrong to kill, no matter what circumstance. However, according to Nemat, Ali believes in following the laws of Islam, which to him means if an Islamic court finds someone guilty and condemns that person to die, he will carry out that sentence without hesitation. This tension between Nemat and Ali highlights the presumed tension between Christianity and Islam. The implication of this tension is that there are fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity that extends even to questions of morality. When Sensoy (2009) talks about social binaries, she tells us that it is common to organize the social world into binaries, with the favoured idea on one side opposing the less favourable idea on the other. For example, binaries such as civilized/savage, man/woman, modern/traditional, West/East are common binaries. However, when we line up binaries using the assumptions made by Nemat, are we to set Christianity against Islam? Furthermore, does this mean Christianity is equated with non-violence, while Islam is inherently violent?

This is not to say the other memoirs stay away from religion altogether. On the contrary, in the beginning of *Persepolis*, the young Satrapi claims she was "born with religion" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 6). As a child she has a very innocent understanding of God, and depicts him as a large white man with white hair, beard and a robe, much like Christian representations of God. Religion, therefore, is not something she disdains; she actually has conversations with God in her bed

at night and aspires to become a prophet. But her "religion" seems to combine a Christian-looking God and Zorastrianist teachings – Islam is not even mentioned.

This devaluing of Islam over Christianity is in line with North American society's overall treatment of Islam, especially in schools. Imam (2009) describes the experiences of Muslim-American families when they try to address the celebration of Eid, the Muslim celebration that marks the end of the fasting of Ramadan, in their children's schools. All the children, regardless of their religion were expected to sing Christmas carols, decorate a Christmas tree, wear a Halloween costume, and hand out Valentine's Day cards. However, when Muslim parents volunteered to provide some information about Eid they were told:

> ..."we" cannot cover religion because "we" observe separation of church and state and therefore "we" won't be needing any holiday things for the Eid holiday; no guest speaker, no treats, no candy, and sometimes not even an Eid holiday greeting. (Imam, 2009, p. 46)

As the study goes on to say, Muslims in American schools are finding it increasingly difficult to practice their religion. While teachers do not see the religious significance in the celebration of Christmas or Valentine's Day, they cannot see past the foreignness of a Muslim holiday. Muslim holidays will continue to be foreign until teachers, like the ones in Imam's study, accept the knowledge and stories of their Muslim community.

Theme 4: The negative portrayal of Muslims

While there are often only a few fully developed Muslim characters in these memoirs (most Muslim characters are simply caricatures, or descriptions of

the Revolutionary Guards of Iran), typically these characters are depicted in a negative way. This begs the question, is there no diversity among Muslims? Are Muslims either mean, or naive? Are they all susceptible to propaganda? By only depicting Muslims in a negative way, these books contribute to the image that all Muslims can be described as one of two extremes: completely out of touch with reality, or dangerous, angry and violent. This limiting depiction of Muslims contributes to the Islamophobic depictions of Muslims that Sensoy (2009) describes in her study of how Muslims are portrayed in textbooks. She found that overwhelmingly, Muslims are lacking diverse representation in textbooks, predominantly seen "in prayer, at mosques, and in Mecca" (Sensoy, 2009, p. 77). The implications of this are that Muslims are defined solely by their religion.

My reflection of these memoirs is no different. Throughout the five memoirs, Muslim characters remain completely devoted to Islam, no matter what. Even those Muslims who question their faith in the end remain devoted to their religion. In *Lolita* the reader learns that even the most religious girls now doubt their religion. They claim they simply feel safe within the familiarity of the religion and are too scared to attempt a world without religion: "it will be like dying and having to start again in a world without guarantees" (Nafisi, 2004, p. 327). Therefore, it appears that their devotion to Islam is more about comfort, and less about a true connection to the religion. These comments seem to imply that not only are people only supporting the government out of security and fear, but also that people are only remaining in the Muslim religion for these same reasons – for the sake of being a part of something, because the alternative is too scary.

These descriptions do not provide the reader with anything but negative images of who a Muslim is, and what it means to be a Muslim.

On the other hand, Joya provides many positive images of Muslims by remembering the people that have come before her and those that have fallen in support of what she is trying to accomplish. This is important because it implies the existence of a movement of resistance to the oppression that exists in Afghanistan; one that comes from inside the country. If one were to find their information only by reading the newspaper or watching the nightly news, these figures – Joya, and the men and women like her – would never appear. It is important that we, as citizens of a country at war with Afghanistan, know the people of this country, not just as terrorists, and not just as victims, but rather as people that are freedom-loving and desire to participate in a democratic government.

Theme 5: Freedom of Women

Throughout all five memoirs is an abundance of images of women as victims of the Islamic regime and suggests to the reader that Islam victimizes women. The implication that women are not free in Islamic countries is a dangerous one, especially when "women's liberation" is so often used as a reason to go to war. The July 29th, 2010 edition of Time Magazine, one of the most widely distributed magazines in America, depicts an Afghan woman whose nose has been brutally severed, leaving a grotesque gaping hole in her otherwise beautiful (and exotic-looking) face. Along with this jarring image is the caption:

"What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan" (Bieber, 2010). This is a bold statement, and suggests Afghanistan will become a land over-run with misogynistic, women-hating men, bent on keeping them submissive by any means necessary, no matter how violent. Therefore, when these memoirs continue to depict Muslim women solely as victims, they may be furthering the cause for war by providing evidence that these Islamic countries do in fact victimize and even torture women.

Women have often been used as political pawns, especially in Eastern countries that have at one point been "Westernized." Skalli (2004) describes in great detail how the colonizers treated the veiling of women in Muslim countries as an example of Muslim backwardness. In turn fundamentalist Muslims use the veiling of women in the same way. This colonial history has resulted in "Muslim women's demands for justice and equality" to always be perceived in the Muslim world "as an act of allegiance to the Western power and betrayal of their own cultural group" (Skalli, 2004, p. 48). This history contextualizes the actions of the Muslim government and Muslim men. Although it does not excuse the behaviour, without the history and context, the Muslim government, enforcing the veil on women at the end of the twentieth century, will to the average North American seem a barbaric, archaic, and downright ridiculous request.

In contrast, Joya makes it clear that it is not the laws of Islam that force her to wear the hijab, but rather the corrupt, US-backed, warlords in power in Afghanistan that force her to hide behind a burqa to protect herself from possible assassination attempts. She contributes to trying to erase this sentiment by

encouraging a discussion about how Islam has been misused throughout recent history. As a member of Afghan Parliament she also made every attempt to add women's equality to the constitution in a legitimate way. Joya realizes that it is in her best interest to work with other women to dispel myths that inequality is due to religion or that it is simply inherent to Afghan culture.

Pazira also speaks to this belief and does attempt to dispel some of the myths about Afghanistan. She mentions a conference she attended in Ottawa in which members of NGOs defend the "culture" of the Taliban implying that their treatment of women is somehow inherent to Afghan culture. The delegate from the Red Cross even points out that the Taliban have "brought peace" (Pazira, 2005, p. 283). For Pazira this goes against all that she believes in and knows about her country since before the reign of the Taliban she mostly felt equal to men in her society. She eventually stands up to the media; when in Cannes where her film, *Kandahar*, debuts, she asserts that Afghan women are not simply quiet, submissive creatures. She goes on to say, "Afghans nowadays are perceived as either victims or villains. The first are to be pitied, the second feared and despised" (Ibid, p. 322). She presents her family and her life as proof that not all of Afghanistan is like the few random shots of desolate villages as seen on the nightly news. In fact, the film she helps create attempts to dispel some of the myths about Afghanistan. When they show it at Cannes, her "revolt – however silly, helpless or absurd" (Ibid, p. 318) is to wear a worn and ragged traditional dress made by her sister. After being interviewed by Western journalists she realizes, "They are not interested in an Afghan woman who can learn and think.

They are rather unhappy that I've dismantled the boxed image of an Afghan woman – submissive, oppressed and able to speak only in a native tongue" (p. 318). Through her book and film, Pazira makes it her goal to present to the West an alternative image of Afghan women.

Once she receives her own education of the Muslim religion Joya realizes that clerics and religious leaders "cherry-pick" quotes in order to prove their points, while often leaving out context. In this way, many of Joya's stories become an opportunity to teach the reader something about Afghan culture, whether to dispel a myth or teach something new, while at the same time she incites the reader to try to change current misrepresentations.

Theme 6: The continued miseducation of the West

When there is little or no context to a story, it is almost as if we are only getting a piece of a whole, that we are not getting the full and complete picture. This can lead to biased and sometimes even wrong assumptions and beliefs. We are all critical researchers when we research the history and context of a story, event or situation. This is how we uncover where knowledge comes from. Using a critical pedagogical perspective in the classroom is important because "critical pedagogy supports the notion that all knowledge is created within a historical context and it is this historical context which gives life and meaning to human experience" (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009, p. 10). To exclude certain aspects of a story effectively silences a part of that history.

My major concern with these memoirs lies in the fact that the descriptions of historical events like the Islamic Revolution in Iran or the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan lack any context. When these events are brought up in the memoirs, there is often little to no background information, or reasons that would explain why these events occurred.

Important facts seem to be missing from certain retellings of history in these memoirs. The history of French and British colonization of Muslim countries is an important and useful history to understand when discussing the current political climate of these countries. The Iranian authors also did not divulge the fact that under the rule of the Shah, Iran was in the grips of a monarch who, while presenting a "modern" front to the West, was also oppressing any form of dissent within the country, as well as siphoning vast sums of money out of the treasury for his own personal use. While this does not absolve the current Muslim government of any wrongdoing, by not presenting these facts and this history, these books present a biased representation of Iran.

In contrast, when the authors do contextualize, when they provide historical information that situates an event in a historical context they are often exposing a truth that is often not common knowledge, and therefore contributes to a better understanding of the situation. A better understanding also contributes to a more positive relationship between the West and the East.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

As a critical researcher it was important to draw out the dominant themes that wove their way through each of the memoirs in different ways, highlighting the lived experience of each of the female authors. Yet as a critical researcher, trained to constantly question not only whose story is being told, but also whose story is *not* being told, it was necessary to delve deeper into the six themes in order to uncover the greater cultural significance of these stories, answering my research question, how do these memoirs influence North American perceptions of Muslims/Islam? As Kincheloe (2005) explains, "The rigorous study of cultural and historical context alerts prospective teachers to the ways dominant myths, behaviors, and language shape their view of the teacher role and the curriculum without conscious filtering" (p. 89). Therefore, as a critical pedagogue, I must take these implications one step further and "get at" how to use these memoirs to teach *against* Islamophobia. The reality is that some of, if not all, of these memoirs are already being read in classrooms in North America. Instead of perpetuating the already ingrained North American beliefs about Muslims, instead of allowing these books to play into Orientalism, it is the duty of the educator to ensure that students read these books critically, thoughtfully and humbly.

The following section will discuss the possibilities for teaching using these memoirs, and other texts like them, in an effort to teach against Islamophobia, addressing my final question, how do teachers use these memoirs to teach against Islamophobia?

Something More Than Traditional: The switch to a Critical Perspective

A traditional method for using literature in the classroom would be to use words like *protagonist* and *antagonist*, ask the students to memorize these words, perhaps even teach them that the prefix "pro-" suggests something that moves forward, while "an-" refers to something that is negative, and then assign the students the task of naming which category the characters in the story fall under. Students would be required to discuss the setting, the plot and the climax of the story, and perhaps even write a character sketch of one of the main characters. Unfortunately, this is what I remember of learning how to "study" literature in grade school. This robotic repetition of compartmentalizing book after book in the same way is enough to drive a student to just download the movie version instead of reading the whole thing. To ask our students to simply follow this formula does them and the literature an injustice.

Using critical pedagogy in the classroom can inform both the teacher and the student in better ways to address the literature that is brought into their environment, no matter what the literature happens to be. An important part of critical pedagogy deals with literacy, especially for Freire (1970), whose initiation into teaching was teaching adults how to read. Freire believed that the only way to truly teach literacy was to engage students in the subject in a way that it related to them and their lives. While literacy has many meanings depending on the time, place, or speaker, at this point in its evolution it refers to "a commitment to and participation in a multiplicity of meaning making systems, many of which are exhibiting ever-greater degrees of interdependence with one another" (Cooper &

White, 2008, p. vii). Critical literacy is understood to be "one of the major pillars of critical pedagogy" taking the notion of literacy and making it critical by "problematizing the asymmetrical relations of power, which structurally reproduce inequalities and social exclusions within schools and society" (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009, p. 279). Therefore, simply asking our students to label the protagonist, or describe the setting is not enough to give students the tools they need to address the social problems afflicting their world today. As Darder, Baltodano & Torres (2009) remind us, education does not exist in a vacuum, and it necessarily is affected by the political climate of our society; "literacy cannot simply be reduced to the mastery of decoding and encoding skills, or to the neutral and technical teaching of language symbols, nor to the adoption of simple 'fetish methods'" (p. 279). Using critical literacy as "the vehicle," teachers can employ the theories of critical pedagogy in their classrooms that will in turn force them to "interrogate the world, unmask ideological and hegemonic discourses, and frame their actions in the interest of the larger struggle for social justice (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009, p. 279). The lesson then becomes infinitely more interesting than a repetitive categorization of protagonists and antagonists.

Literary Culture: The transition to a politically conscious classroom

When examining these texts it becomes clear that culture and literacy are inextricably linked. Edward Said (2001) stated, "society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together" (p. 2011). In revisiting my research question, how can these memoirs, or other similar texts, be used to teach against Islamophobia, the findings of this study indicate that this is true for an entire

genre of literature – namely, we must connect the literature we read to the greater political and societal context. Said (2001) goes on to say, "too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent" (p. 2011); this was the emotional dilemma that I faced when conducting this study.

At the outset of this study I optimistically thought that by reading multiple memoirs by women who lived throughout the Middle East and in other Muslim countries I would be opening myself to a wealth of knowledge, rich in diversity and life. As I began reading the third memoir about Iran, I realized the perspectives of the authors were incredibly similar. Of course they all had different stories, but their attitudes towards their country stayed the same throughout all three memoirs. The two Afghan authors were quite different, but I believe that is largely due to the fact that Malalai Joya was incredibly poor, actually having to fight for an education, while Nelofer Pazira was well-off and quite privileged.

Using critical literacy in the classroom an educator should be able to engage students in a discussion about why the author's background is important. Returning to Said's above comments, an important aspect of using these books to teach against Islamophobia is to recognize that these memoirs are not "politically innocent," and that they should be understood in a greater historical and political context. Students should be "encouraged to think critically and answer critical questions that will enable them to examine their own insights as well as those presented in texts" (M. Stonebanks, 2010, p. 328). Taking a Freirian approach, the best way to do this is to ask questions and to begin a dialogue.

Summarizing Freire, Peterson (2009) reminds us that dialogue "is not just permissive talk" with the teacher allowing the students to debate a subject for the sole purpose of debate (p. 313). Instead dialogue must be seen as a "conversation with a focus and a purpose" (Ibid, p. 313). The goal is to give students the agency to drive the dialogue to where they see fit, that the teacher is not the only authority on what is said in the classroom. As Peterson (2009) states, "by discussion and extensive use of open-ended questioning by the teacher, students begin to think about the object or topic of study" (p. 313). Dialogue in the classroom then becomes a way to engage with a text, to go beyond talking about the text, these memoirs for instance, as simply another story, and instead see these memoirs as part of a larger genre. The question then becomes, how does this genre contribute to the larger conversation about Muslims? Some have suggested that this is "a genre in the service of empire" and that "these memoirs and their authors must be understood not only in terms of the politics of reception in the United States but also in terms of the U.S. imperialistic project that is informed by the historical Euro-American colonial discourses of civilization" (Akhavan, Bashi, Kia & Shakhsari, 2007, para. 2). Through a Freirian approach to dialogue, these are questions that can be analyzed and tackled in a politically-conscious classroom.

Bringing a Critical Perspective to the Classroom

Traditional education has viewed students as mere receptacles of the information teachers are expected to give them in a deposit style education system: "The routine is simple: we develop a body of objective and neutral data,

transmit it to students who commit it to their Office Depot files, and then we test them to see how much they 'mastered'" (Kincheloe, 2005a, np). Employing a teaching style based on a critical pedagogical approach allows the teacher to address not only the required teaching in a creative way, but also to creatively design a curriculum that includes what is *not* required.

As Peterson (2009) suggests, a teacher must be creative enough to address the mandatory things that must be covered in school, but in a way that is relevant to the students. For example, "A student could: Write or tell about what would happen if she were to take the main character home for dinner; write a letter to the main character comparing the student's life to that of the main characters; write a version of the story that draws on some comparable situation in their school community" (Peterson, 2009, p. 308).

For a more mature age group the process of first uncovering the socio-economic background of one author and comparing that author's text to another author of a different socio-economic background can be an excellent introduction to how economic backgrounds affect how an author will view an event in history. Doing a similar investigation of the book's publishing house can also reveal how economics plays a role in who is published, what is written and how certain things are written about, especially historical events.

Another rich source of information, if both teacher and student are lucky enough to have the resources, is the blogosphere. It seems like pretty much everyone has a blog these days, even fictional characters, people's pets, and entire

corporations. Blogs are also popular in other countries and many are being written in English in order to attract North American readers. One blog in particular is incredibly interesting when studying the genre of women writing in Muslim countries. *Iraqigirl* is a blog that has been online since 2004 that chronicles the life of a teenage girl in Mosul, Iraq and is an example of an alternative source of information about life in Iraq. She has also amalgamated her blogs into a book.

While these suggestions are not exhaustive, they are the first steps toward a critically-conscious curriculum that looks at the literature and resources that are available to teachers and suggest a better way to address their themes and topics. While growing Islamophobic behaviour is a threat in the United States and Canada, I believe that teachers can play an important role in reversing this trend. Teachers can do this by not only teaching alternative narratives that depict the diversity of Muslims, but also by calling their students' attention to how certain books, texts, memoirs or correspondence, contribute to a negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam. Because if knowledge is power, then those who first recognize that Muslims and Islam have been wrongfully portrayed in Western society, and second know *why* and *how* this happens, will have the ability to break this mould.

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