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On the Flying Carpet of Orientalism: Reading Anita Amirrezvani's *The Blood of Flowers*

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Abstract

This article draws attention to the ways in which Anita Amirrezvani's *The Blood of Flowers* (2007), a historical novel set in 17th-century Iran, can be placed within the neo-orientalist discourse which informs many of the post-9/11 memoirs and novels set in contemporary Iran by women of the Iranian diaspora in the United States. Besides being a novel on Islam and Islamic rule—which makes it much timely for the post-9/11 period—*The Blood of Flowers* focuses on the question of women in Islamic/Iranian society, which furthers its consanguinity with the memoirs and novels written by women of the Iranian diaspora in the last decade. The argument made in this article is that Amirrezvani's novel is, at least, as much about a distant and finished past of Iran as it is about contemporary Iran. In an attempt to retain the interest of the Western readers of diasporic Iranian literature by women, Amirrezvani has tried to retell the often repeated claims regarding women in present-day Iran in a new way, in the guise of a historical novel set in the distant past of Iran. This explains why, in the narrative, orientalist representations of Iran's past history and neo-orientalist images of contemporary Iran are presented in an anachronistic coexistence.

Keywords: Anita Amirrezvani, *The Blood of Flowers*, Islam, Iranian Diaspora, Post-9/11, Iranian women.

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Introduction

In the last few years, western readers have witnessed the explosive burgeoning of a host of English novels and memoirs by women of the Iranian diaspora. This sudden visibility has partly been due to the rise of a second generation of Iranian immigrants who unlike their parents speak fluent English and, therefore, can play greater roles in the social and cultural affairs of their host countries. However, as many critics have observed, the most obvious reason for this literary boom in recent years has been the increased political disputes between Iran and the West in the post-9/11 period, which has caused the continuous presence of Islam/Iran on the news and, consequently, an unprecedented curiosity of the western readers about anything associated with Islam/Iran (Draznik 2008:55; Whitlock 2007:12). The then two-decade-old disputes between Iran and the West suddenly found new and far-reaching overtones when, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Iran again made headlines, this time not just as a political entity, but also as part of the larger context of Islam which, has since, been represented as the main threat to the fruits and hopes of 'human civilization.' Not surprisingly, the vocabulary dominating the western side of the dispute, although modern in language, has not been very different from the wording of the papal discourses during the times of the Crusades. In the aftermath of September 11, the word "Iran" alone on the cover of a book has been enough to draw the attention of significant numbers of readers to that book and even make it a bestseller¹.

Being addressed to a post-9/11 western audience, many of the English memoirs and novels by diasporic Iranian women in recent years are involved in the politics of neo-orientalism. The strategy, or the result, has usually been the representation of Iran "from a transnational perspective" (Marandi 179), which has involved systematic disregard of Iran's history and recourse to the already-written. Even a quick glance at the titles and covers of many of these texts would reveal their lack of originality. Almost all of these female writers have made the issue of women in Iranian society a central theme of their works. One probable reason for this female domination and female centrality has been the unprecedented centrality of Muslim women's rights in the hegemonic discourse of the "war on terror" in recent years. According to Christian Ho,

[a]mong many other legacies, the September 11 terrorist attacks will be remembered by some for catapulting women's rights to the centre stage of global politics. As the United States launched the war on terror in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the liberation of women from barbaric regimes became a powerful rationale for intervention. (433)

In such circumstances, many diasporic Iranian women have used their privileged status as "eye-witness" to the problems of women in contemporary Iran and have responded to western readers' interest in "real" "documentary" stories about alleged child marriages, domestic tyranny, stoning, etc. According to Gillian Whitlock, the female Iranian writer has used her ideal status as a mediator between the two cultures to tell the 'true' story of Iranian woman in the language of the western reader: she is "just 'Other' enough to represent her subject authoritatively, and at the same time familiar enough not to alienate her audience" (2008:14).

Also, preference for the memoir over fiction has been symptomatic of the social and political, rather than literary, concerns of Western readers. Regarding the primarily socio-historical concerns of the memoir, Kate Adams has said, "memoir gives its readers an author as guide, an informant whose presence lends a unique perspective to the historical moment" (8). As Lorraine Adams has observed, "[s]ometimes Muslim women attract Western attention less for their literary efforts than for how they can be considered in a larger political debate" (19). The same observation is made by Anna Vanzan who, pointing to the phenomenal success of Iranian women's diasporic memoirs, argues, "these writings, all composed in English since they address a non-Iranian readership, are celebrated for reasons beyond their literary quality, since they serve extra purposes such as the efforts of individuals who bear witness to social/political injustice" (16). Jasmine Darznik, herself the author of a post-9/11 memoir, thus emphasizes the privileged status of Iranian immigrant women in the last decade: "In the post-9/11 period, Iranian immigrant women have emerged as important agents in framing how American readers see and interpret not only the history, politics, and culture of Iran but of the greater contemporary Middle East" (2007: iii). Nahid Rachlin, a leading writer of Diasporic Iranian literature, emphasizes the extra-literary concerns of contemporary writing by Iranian

women in the West and believes that “the success of memoirs by Iranian women has something to do with Americans' curiosity about Iranian women, their ‘true’ lives” (2008: 156). In fact, diasporic Iranian women have increasingly engaged themselves in the practice of orientalist feminism whose basic assumption, as many critics have observed, is a binary opposition between the ‘civilized’ West as a paradise for women and the ‘barbaric’ Islamic world as a hellish prison (Toor 1; Bahramitash 224).

Alongside the primary aim of responding to western readers’ curiosity about Muslim/Iranian women, there has been another, less effective but more genuine, motivation behind the post-9/11 literary boom among the Iranian diaspora. This motivation has to do with a sense of cultural homelessness experienced by the second generation of Iranian immigrants in a period characterized by the sweeping wave of Islamophobia. Confronted with an unprecedented hostility toward Muslims/Iranians, many Iranian immigrants who once regarded themselves as part of the American ‘melting pot’ were suddenly awakened to the realization that they did not totally belong. As Karim and Rahimieh put it, “[b]eing bombarded with unfavorable and repetitious images of and headlines about Iran and Iranians has reinforced the Iranian American community's anxieties about their national affiliation (9). Partly as a result of this shocking realization of cultural homelessness, the second generation of Iranian immigrants has begun a process of self-redefinition in memoirs and novels in which they have tried to investigate the issues of Iranian identity, Iranian immigrant identity, and the implications of living on the borders of two different languages and cultures. Many of these works involve the protagonist’s brief return to Iran in order to explore the aspects of Iranian culture and Iranian Identity. Drawing attention to the dominance of Iran and Iranian culture in post-9/11 “return narratives” by the Iranian diaspora, Jasmin Darznik argues,

return narratives demonstrate a persistent feature of Iranian immigrant literature: the dominance of Iran -- its history as well as its contemporary culture and politics-- in the exploration and articulation of Iranian American identity. This is a striking departure from many other US ethnic literatures, where issues of

homeland and heritage have tended to give way to representations of the everyday lives of immigrants in America. (2008: 56)

Not all the novels and memoirs that have emerged from these circumstances have responded to the question regarding Iranian culture and Iranian woman in the same way. While many writers have succumbed to the dominant opinions and have tried to reproduce the prescribed and stereotypical images of Iranian culture, there have been others who have tried to represent the subtleties and complexities of Iranian culture and Iranian society from a more or less truly historical and objective point of view. In what follows, we have tried to draw attention to the ways in which Anita Amirrezvani's *The Blood of Flowers* has contributed to the current debate on the subject of Islam and Iranian/Islamic culture.

Scheherazade's Tired Tale and Bored Listeners

In order to demonstrate the conditions surrounding the production and publication of Amirrezvani's novel (its moment of production), it is better to begin by two anecdotes from the novel itself. In an attempt to sell her carpet to the Circassian concubine of Shah Abbas' harem, the unnamed narrator and protagonist of *The Blood of Flowers* conceals the fact that she herself has been both the designer and knoter of that beautifully designed and skillfully knotted carpet. The poor young girl is afraid that the sight of her tattered dress and her rough and callused fingers would shatter her client's romantic dreams about the Iranian carpet-weavers and, hence, devalue the carpet in her desirous eye: "Better for her to imagine it being made by a carefree young girl who skipped across hillsides plucking flowers for dyes before settling down to tie a few relaxing knots in between sips of pomegranate juice" (350). Therefore, she conceals "all the labor and sufferings that were hidden beneath a carpet" (350). Of course the very rich surface of the carpets reveals the amount of labor and life invested in them - the "vast fields of flowers [...] murdered for their dye, innocent worms boiled alive for their silk, and [...], women who became deformed" - to any discerning eye (350-51). Yet, in the hope of a good bargain, she prefers not to speak the truth.

Also, earlier in the novel, when the young protagonist consults the "charm maker" about her failure to sustain her husband's interest, the charm maker

responds with an extended metaphor of story-telling. After explaining at length the many tricks and schemes available to a story-teller for sustaining her listeners' interest she adds, "[s]o think of your evenings with your husband as a time when you tell him a story, but not with words. To him, it's an old tale, so you need to learn to tell it in new ways" (190). Inspired by the charm maker's metaphor of story-telling and her lesson about erotic skills and techniques, the protagonist paints the design of one of her carpets unto her body before giving herself up to her husband (195). During this act of body-painting, the young girl is inspired by the many twists and turns of the carpet design and decides to imitate them in her erotic attempts at sustaining the interest of the bored husband. By doing this act of self-objectification she turns herself into a carpet on which her cruel spouse would sit as he likes. At this point, the act of telling a story, making a carpet and skillful ways of giving physical pleasure become one and the same, and the young protagonist continues to develop these skills simultaneously. Thus, a carpet's artful design and a story's artful twists and turns become emblems for the means through which the unnamed teenage protagonist devises her submissive, and yet ingenuous, ways of giving pleasure to her lustful but easily bored and irritable mate.

The story of the protagonist's attempt at sustaining her romantic client's interest in the carpet and that of her attempt at sustaining her bored husband's interest can be easily read as metaphors for the novelist's own attempt to sell her novel to an English-speaking reading public who have their own old romantic opinions not only about the typical post-9/11 Iranian woman author, but also about the setting of her story. Moreover, the novel was being written in a time when, the world seemed bored with the "old tale" of the Iranian woman's captivity in the prison-house of her fatherland and her torture by the despotic Iranian man. As Persis Karim acknowledges, in the post-911 period the West, especially the United States has been "dominated by predictable and tired narratives of Iran and the Middle East" (12). In her attempt to add yet another title to the lengthy list of recently published novels and memoirs about women's lives in Iran, the author has consciously and skillfully evoked some of the best-known neo-orientalist tropes and images, and yet she has tried to present them "in new ways". She takes the reader back to 17th-century Iran and the exoticized city of Isfahan under the reign of Shah Abbas. But, one can

demonstrate that this surface novelty is only a new way of making old points about contemporary Iran. This new Scheherazade must be able to please her bored and irritable listener with her ingenious psychological insight. Regarding the unfavorable market conditions for the Iranian woman's memoir, Darznik says, "“But does the world *really* need another memoir by an Iranian American woman?” So I was asked recently by a fellow Iranian at a reading in San Francisco” (2009: par 1).

In Amirrezvani's novel, the act of writing a novel has been explicitly and extensively compared to the act of weaving a carpet. Throughout the novel, the women knot their carpets and tell their entertaining tales while the novel itself is being woven out of their act of knotting and narrating. In this way, the whole process of weaving a carpet becomes an extended metaphor for the writing of the novel itself. The distinct and apparently dissimilar oriental tales retold by the female characters are skillfully woven into each other and into the whole context of the novel, exactly like the many different and distinct patterns and shapes which create a formal and thematic unity in a skillfully designed Iranian carpet.

Amirrezvani is dealing with an audience (or clientele) who are already filled with opinions about Iran and Iranian women, exactly as the young carpet-maker's client is filled with her own opinions regarding Iranian carpet makers. Both the novelist and the protagonist are aware of the constructed images in the minds of their clients and, ironically, they both prefer to use them to their own benefit. The cover of the novel features the face of a veiled Iranian woman fringed by the flowery patterns of an Iranian carpet and an excerpt from a *USA Today* review which regards the novel as “[e]nchanting ... A passion-filled, exotic delight.” The sexual symbolism of the title together with the whole cover design promise an exotic tale filled with "oriental" promises and orientalist stereotypes. These signs are not false. Throughout the novel, one can count many instances of the well-understood orientalist and neo-orientalist tropes and images: oriental despotism; oriental luxury, lassitude and sensuality; oriental superstition and social stagnancy; oriental pedophilia; the exotic harem with its Circassian beauty; the hammam; abject but extremely sensuous women; an ample amount of oriental eroticism; stoning of women; sex slavery; sexual abuse of women; violence against women, etc. Many of these elements are part of the main story and some are brought in with the seven “oriental tales”

narrated by the characters and interspersed between the seven chapters of the novel. As such, the novel tries to simultaneously cater to the taste for exoticism (like works in the tradition of Romantic orientalism such as those by Lord Byron and Thomas Moore) and motifs of oriental/Iranian cruelty and despotism (also going back to the earliest examples of orientalist writings, such as Aeschylus's *The Persians*, to 19th-century versions, such as James Morier's 'Oriental Tales' of Persia of the Safavid Era).

Amirrezvani's Manifest and Latent Bibliography

In the "Author's Note" to the novel (372-377), Amirrezvani openly acknowledges her sources. In her attempt to write a historical novel on the "actual situations"² of 17th-century Iran, the author spends hours among "dusty library shelves" to examine the "treasures" of orientalist writers' works about Iranian culture and history (372). Her bibliography is a list of texts that, except for a few translations, are all originally authored by western writers. The author's seminal source is Sir John Chardin, whom she acknowledges as "an important source [...] about the customs and mores of the Safavid period" (374). To Amirrezvani, Chardin is a "great travel writer" whose "astute" and detailed observations cast a light on 17th-century Iran. Contrary to Amirrezvani, many critics have observed in Chardin, a variety of faults "including arrogance, prejudice, isolation, and ignorance of every kind, from the historical and cultural background to the language" (Emerson 372). Scholars have argued that Chardin has always served as a seminal source for orientalist representations of Iran, including works by Montesquieu, Thomas Moore (1779 –1852), and James Morier among others (Pirnajmuddin 97, 134). The following lines from Chardin's journal of his travels to Persia indicate how biased and grossly homogenizing his observations are:

besides those Vices which the Persian are generally addicted to, they are Lyers in the highest Degree; they speak, swear, and make false Depositions upon the least Consideration; they borrow and pay not; and if they can Cheat, they seldom lose the Opportunity; they are not to be trusted in Service, nor in all other Engagements; without Honesty in their Trading, wherein they overreach one so ingeniously, that one

cannot help but being bubbled; greedy of Riches, and of vain
Glory, of Respect and Reputation, which they endeavour to
gain by all Means possible. (187)

Henri Massé's *Persian Beliefs and Customs* and Leonard M. Helfgott's *Ties that Bind: A Social History of the Iranian Carpet* are among her other sources. No Farsi source has been acknowledged. During the nine years she spends on the project, Amirrezvani makes several trips to Iran to investigate the setting of her story. Interestingly, what she acknowledges as an Iranian source here is not a book or a museum, but only "Iran's extensive oral tradition," as if Iran has no written tradition. She mentions Roger M. Savory's English translation of Eskandar Beg Monshi's *Tarikh-e Alam Aray Abbasi* as the basis for only one of the events in the story, although she has "taken the liberty of compressing" the event. But the novelist's confidence in Chardin is so unwavering that parts of the novel are actually direct quotations from his *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient* (Amirrezvani 374). For Amirrezvani, "[e]very great historical period deserves a great travel writer, and seventeenth-century Iran found one in Sir John Chardin"(page). This remark indicates how westernized her outlook is: as if the Iran's history has been recorded only by western travelers. The novelist's minimization or total disregard of Persian histories of Shah Abbas's reign casts doubt on her intention and authority to represent the "actual situations" of that period. Eskandar Beg Monshi's brilliant history, which Amirrezvani mentions in brief, is well-known for its minute first-hand description of Iran's politics, geography, culture, arts and customs during the reign of Shah Abbas, although it is only one of the Persian sources on Amirrezvani's subject³.

The novelist's choice of 17th-century Iran as the setting of her novel may be seen as an escapist strategy in the highly politicized post-9/11 environment. Indeed, the novel's fairytale-like world seems to be a rare phenomenon among the "eye-witness"⁴ documentary memoirs and novels, set in contemporary Iran, by women of the Iranian diaspora in the last decade. However, Amirrezvani's claim to documentary truth and her claim that "a number of the customs" described in the novel "still exist today" ("A Conversation" 5), casts doubt on such an assessment. Regarding her choice of Isfahan as the setting of the novel, Amirrezvani says, "I hoped to introduce Western readers to Isfahan's wonders,

especially since only the most intrepid travelers see it for themselves these days” (ibid 4). Although Amirrezvani's orientalist bibliography partly explains her treatment of the subject, there are other things that cannot be explained by such texts. For example, neither Chardin nor any other of the old orientalists can explain Amirrezvani's use of terms like “the Gulf” (96, 256) instead of “Persian Gulf”. As a novel about Iranian women's hardships under “Islamic patriarchy” the novel has its own neo-orientalist post-9/11 bibliography.

Amirrezvani's “Flying Carpet of Orientalism”

As a story set in a fairly distant past of Iran, *The Blood of Flowers* is expected to be replete with exotic pre-modern images and events familiar from many orientalist texts about the Safavid period. This, along with Amirrezvani's own technique of story within story, by which she makes her female characters narrate seven oriental tales (almost all of which are based on English or French sources), adds to the exotic quality of the novel. Among the orientalist tropes, which the novelist obsessively develops, is the concept of “oriental sex” which, according to Edward Said, is one of the constant fetishes of orientalism and a standard commodity of western mass culture (2003:191). The novelist devotes many sections and pages to soft pornography, describing the young narrator's sexual games with her barbarous and lustful partner. Eight full-length sections are devoted to minute descriptions of “oriental sex” and many other shorter passages on the same trope are interspersed between the chapters of the novel, all of which are painted against a supposed Islamic background. The bulk of the rest of the work is also an extended gaze on the young narrators' objectified and fetishized body in the hammam, the dressing room and other intimate places which at times seems to be a pathologically obsessive gaze on the oriental female's body. Amirrezvani explicitly evokes her readers' mental archive of orientalist “hammam paintings”, such as Jean Leon Jerome's, when she makes the narrator describe her submissive condition in bed as a ‘princess frozen in a painting’ (136) to emphasize her total objectification as a means of sexual pleasure. Also significant is the explicit way in which the author makes other supposedly feminine oriental activities, such as story-telling and carpet-making, emblems for the oriental women's sexual expertise. Thus, in a novel about storytelling and carpet-making, “oriental” sex is present everywhere: the

narrator's ingenuity and skill at carpet making is supposed to remind the reader of her skill and ingenuity in bed. The image of Scheherazade becomes the image of an abject but extremely sensuous and skillful oriental woman whose sole purpose is to give all imaginable pleasure to her irritable master. Nima Naghibi's description of Iranian women's writings in last decade seems to be exactly based on Amirrezvani's novel:

Most of these books have covers with tantalizing photographs of abject veiled women who promise to reveal themselves in their tell-all narratives. The texts promise the Western reader access to the East, a promise that invokes a long history of colonial desire to unveil the simultaneously eroticized and abject Muslim woman. (81)

As an extended gaze on the female body, Amirrezvani's novel puts the Western reader in the perspective of a male voyeur. This technique is in line with what Edward Said recognized as an essential trait of orientalism, namely, the genderization of West/East relations (2003:138). The novel is replete with images and tropes that represent Iranian society as essentially feminine. The prolonged gaze on the Shah's harem, the public hammam, women's dressing rooms, the exotic bazaar, etc., serves to depict Iran as a society preoccupied with luxury, jewelry and sensuality. The narrator's almost exhibitionistic tell-all story and her servile act of self-objectification are in line with the novelist's objectification of Iran as a passive and fertile feminine realm inviting imperial gaze and impress.

In many works by women of the Iranian diaspora in post-9/11 era, the condition of a beautiful but abject woman in the hands of an ineffectual and abusive husband or father can be read metaphorically as the condition of a rich and promising nation under despotic or ineffectual rule. In Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen*, the story of an Iranian woman's escape from the prison-house of a despotic father, one of the characters compares the condition of Iran in the world to that of a beautiful virgin who cannot survive without the support of a man (67). The front cover of Davar Ardalan's 2007 memoir features a young woman on whose bosom the book's title, *My Name Is Iran*, appears as an identity tag.

The use of the phrase "on the flying carpet of orientalism" in the title of this article, borrowed from Rana Kabbani (x), is fitting here not only because the novelist joins the debate on Iranian women in the form of a novel about Iranian carpets and carpet makers, but also, since it alludes to the famous trope of the magic carpet, which provides possibility of easy journey through place and sometimes through time, the phrase draws attention to Amirrezvani's anachronism and insouciance with time. It is interesting to see how she back-projects recent orientalist-feminist images of contemporary Iranian/Muslim women onto an Iranian woman supposedly from the reign of Shah Abbas in the seventeenth century. By the end of the novel, Amirrezvani's unnamed narrator, who has already been separated from her husband, appears as a woman who is determined to keep her distance from men and to live an artist's free life. One can argue that this individualistic pattern of mind and this theme of separation from the Iranian husband, famously used in Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011), is a recent trope and its back-projection on 17th-century Iran has resulted in anachronism. Dohra Ahmad draws attention to a general characteristic of Muslim women's narratives in America in which, "[d]espite the updated image of the oppressed Muslim woman as plucky individualist, the books' covers, in particular, work strenuously to invoke and revive the old nineteenth-century harem imagery" (110). Amirrezvani's surface novelty lies in her reversing this process, namely, invoking images of present-day Iran in a book supposedly about Iran's past history.

Many scholars have tried to explain Farhadi's brilliant success with western film critics, but an important point disregarded by critics is the way Farhadi's story of divorce and departure can be linked to contemporary literature by diasporic Iranian women. Among recent works, by women of the Iranian diaspora, that narrate the story of an Iranian woman's separation from an abusive Iranian husband or a despotic father are, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nahid Rachlin's *Persian Girls*, Porochista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*, Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen*, and Zoe Ghahremani's *Sky of Red Poppies*, to name a few. In Nafisi's memoir, the main character (the author herself) decides to divorce her husband the day she is married to him (83), and after the divorce she adamantly shuns the company of all Iranians, especially Iranian men (ibid). Rachlin's *Persian Girls* is the

story of two sister's dream of escaping Iran and their despotic father. One of them, the author herself, fulfills her dream of going to the US and becomes an author, but Pari, the elder sister, is forcedly married to an undesirable abusive man who leads her to her early tragic death. In Khakpour's novel, Dariush, a troubled and violent man constantly haunted by nightmares of his mysterious past life in Iran, is finally left alone in his immigrant's house in Los Angeles when his wife leaves her -- his son, Xerxes, already gone and lost due to Darius's abusive treatment of him. In *Sky of Red Poppies* we read the story of Roya who is alienated from her cruel and opium-smoking father and is committed to exile in the United States.

Another dominant motif in *The Blood of Flowers* is the concept of "oriental fatalism"; a motif which is closely related to the orientalist motifs of "oriental sloth" and oriental social stagnancy. The Isfahan of the novel has two completely opposite faces. On the one hand, there is the picture of "oriental splendor" embodied in the exotic lives of characters such as Fareydoon whose possessions and luxuries remind the reader of the oriental Sultan's exotic palaces, gardens, countless wives and concubines, sex slaves, and private hammams. This orientalist trope of oriental splendor, as Said observes, has always served as a means to provoke and reinforce the Western subject's greed for the material resources of the East (1998: xvii). On the other hand, there is the horrifying image of the extremely poor and starving town. The novelist shows the reader both of these two extremes. Isfahan is also depicted as a city of hopeless beggars who continuously stop passengers. What is interesting is the way these poor people attribute their wretchedness to the movements of the stars and other natural phenomenon and see their only hope of redemption in a different positioning of the stars. In the beginning of the novel, the readers are introduced to a village with a single tree. The poor people – who have not managed to add a second tree to the "old cypress" – have gathered to listen to a seer (named "Hajj Ali") reading their fortunes:

I stood near the old cypress, the only tree in our village, which was decorated with strips of cloth marking people's vows. Everyone was looking upward at the stars, their chins pointing toward the sky, their faces grave. I was small enough to see under Hajj Ali's big white beard, which looked like a tuft of desert scrub. (7)

Thus, the Isfahan of the novel, as a typical ‘oriental’ society, is depicted as a society without “History” in the sense of social dynamism and change. It is a society that due to the predominance of fatalism and lassitude, and as a result of oriental despotic rule, can never overcome its deep-rooted social injustice and class gap. Such description of the “Orient” as essentially stagnant and backward can be read “as part of a civilizational discourse that categorizes nations along an axis of evolutionary development and provides “evidence” for foreign and imperial intervention” (Naghibi 81).

Moreover, in Amirrezvani’s novel Islam is evoked to explain the social injustice and political evils depicted by the novelist. When the protagonist and her mother, Maheen, arrive in the central square of Isfahan they are amazed by the magnificent spectacle created by the conjoining of Shah Abbas’s palace and “his private yellow-domed mosque”, the Great Bazar and the vast Friday mosque. “Power, money, and God, all in one place” remarks Maheen (34). The author’s caricatures of a number of Islamic concepts and practices, such as fasting during Ramazan and contemporary marriage, reduce them to ridiculous and barbaric customs. Considering the space devoted to descriptions of women’s dresses, spices, hammam rituals, the harem, and the bazaar, it is interesting to see that none of the Islamic practices and rituals referred to in the novel are fairly explained or contextualized. The novelist traces Islam in many of the most disgraceful acts and moments. Fareydoon, who is a practicing Muslim, signs the “contract” of his grotesque and unjust marriage on the first day of Ramazan and the evening call to prayer (heard along with the firing of the canon) becomes a call for Fareydoon’s sexual abuse. When the poor protagonist goes to a holy Islamic shrine in order to gather some charity to feed her starving mother, she is accosted by a fat bearded pilgrim: “I don’t care what you look like under your *picheh* [...] how about a quick little *sigheh*, just for an hour?” (308). A few days later, the same man, who is a butcher, finds the hungry and helpless girl in his shop asking for a little meat. What he asks as price is “an hour after the last call to prayer” (321). Here, the call to prayer is made a call to licentiousness. This “blending of religion with licentiousness among Muslims”, which Edward Said (2003:163) detects in typical orientalist texts, is a recurrent motif in Amirrezvani’s novel. A combination of this motif and the motif of oriental sensuality and the “excess of libidinous passions”

(Said 2003:163) results in interesting tropes in the novel. When trying to find out the possible reason for Gordieh's successful and happy marriage, the narrator concludes, "[she] was a *seyyedeh*: The descendants of the Prophet were known for having sexual powers beyond those of other women" (178).

One can argue that Amirrezvani's attempt at presenting Islam as the root of all immorality and social injustice is affected by the current vogue of Islamophobia in mainstream Western media. It is also symptomatic of what Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flaskerud see as the "Western tendency to view every issue of the Middle East through the lens of religion, Islam in particular" (2). In the last decade, the mainstream Western media has bombarded the world with the image of a monolithically constructed Islam which is continuously invoked as the single explanation and common denominator of all the oppressions and exploitations in the Islamic World and all the acts of terror in the rest of the world. Against this Islamophobic tendency in socio-historical studies about the Middle East, reasonable "scholars have required that instead of invoking Islam to explain behavior in 'the Muslim World' we should look at historical as well as contemporary social conditions, relations, and conflicts" (Toor 3). In addition, as Noam Chomsky argues in many of his works including *Necessary Illusions* and *Deterring Democracy*, Western powers' interventions and their deterrence of real democracy in Muslim countries have been among the key factors that have had negative influences on those societies.

The novel can be seen as a detailed picture of cruelty and injustice projected on a boldly painted "Islamic" background. The novelists' caricatures of Islamic rituals and practices serve to present them either as explanations or justifications of all social problems or simply as grotesque nonsense. One of the seven oriental tales included in the novel is the story of "Haroot and Maroot [sic]". The author attributes this legend to Islamic tradition. This story, like many other such legends that have formed around these two Qur'anic figures, has had some currency in Muslim communities (Fatemi 15). Among the prominent Muslim exegetes who totally reject this legend and similar ones is Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaei who regards the story as apocryphal (Tabatabaei 25). There have been a few, however, who have attached some credence to it (ibid 23-28). Thus, although the story is not in the Qur'an and therefore is not part of the mainstream teachings, it still belongs to Islamic

tradition. Regarding the astonishing variety of views expressed in Islamic literature regarding the true story of Harut and Marut, Tabatabaei argues that the number of possible ways of constructing this story amount to the astonishing number of “one million and two hundred sixty thousand [...] ($4 \times 3^9 \times 2^4$)!!” (17). This fact indicates the existence of a wide spectrum of views, interpretations and practices all belonging to the "Muslim world", including such extremely unpopular interpretations and practices as Bin-Ladanism and Al-Qaida. It contradicts the views implied by most of the western media outlets in which the basic assumption is the existence of a monolithic “Islam” which is continuously invoked as the main explanation and common denominator of all acts of terror in the world.

Conclusion

Based on the above, one can conclude that Anita Amirezvani's *The Blood of Flowers*, like many of the memoirs and novels written by women of the Iranian diaspora in the post-9/11 period, is informed by the current neo-orientalist discourse which has often used many such texts in justifying Western powers' imperialist project in the Islamic World. The preceding sections of this article indicated that Amirrezvani's choice of the Safavid period as the setting of her novel has two old goals: first, it provides an opportunity to speak about an allegedly Islamic government; second, it retells the old story of Iranian women's captivity in contemporary Iran in a new way. Thus the novel is at least as much about contemporary Iran as it is about the Safavid period. Like most, but not all, of the contemporary memoirs and novels by women of the Iranian diaspora *The Blood of Flowers* follows the well-known trend of condemning Islam as the root of all oppression and exploitation in the Islamic World. Like most of these texts, it bases its narrative on the vicissitudes of women in the prison-house of the “Islamic society” and finds their salvation in their separation from Muslim men.

Notes:

- 1- For instance, one can point to Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Firouzeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi* (2003), and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003)

- 2- Amirezvani has said that her characters are based “on actual situations that Iranian women might have faced” (“A Conversation” 2)
- 3- The Safavid era, especially the reign of Shah Abbas, has been a favorite subject of modern historical scholarship in Iran.
- 4- Fatemeh Keshavarz (2007: 2) applies the term “eye-witness” literature to the recently published memoirs by Iranian diaspora women

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