

Not Without My Daughter: Resurrecting the American Captivity Narrative

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Abstract

As far as literary representations of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the West are concerned, according to Farzaneh Milani, Betty Mahmoody's best-selling *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) remains "the most popular book ever published in the U.S. about Iran." Nevertheless, the book's unprecedented popularity notwithstanding, it has garnered scant critical attention. Hence, as the first major literary analysis of the text, this paper sets out to illustrate how Mahmoody's "memoir" functions within the paradigm of the well-established literary tradition of American captivity narratives. In so doing, it demonstrates how the text constitutes a site wherein the three subgenres of captivity narratives – as a religious pilgrimage, a propagandistic tract, and a sensational shocker – converge. It also analyzes the conceptualization of captivity as a condition that transcends the boundaries of the spatial and the physical. Furthermore, analysis of the text reveals how the book's production and reception were conditioned not only by its construction within the parameters of American captivity narratives, but also by what came to be known in the West as the "Iran Hostage Crisis." Finally, the production and reception of *Not Without My Daughter* is critiqued as a testament to the protean nature of American captivity narratives and the genre's malleability, which allow it to be rehashed and reformulated to align with the dominant sociopolitical zeitgeist at the time of production.

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Twenty years before Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) would sing, “Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran,” to the old Beach Boys tune “Barbara Ann,” the idea was proposed in the most popular book ever published in the US about Iran.¹

Introduction

Recent polls conducted in the United States on Iran’s public image reveal that the vast majority of Americans view Iran unfavorably,² with many participants regarding it as their country’s “greatest enemy.”³ These polls were carried out in the context of ongoing saber-rattling about an impending war against Iran, prior to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement. The prospect of war, as many international political pundits contend, would be little short of an Armageddon or, as Michel Chossudovsky has argued, a “World War III scenario.”⁴ Washington’s official stance that it has no qualms about bombing Iran is evident in the much-repeated assertion that the military option must remain on the proverbial negotiating table, even after a historic deal has been reached. Against this backdrop, it is particularly important to examine how the image of Iran is constructed and ingrained in the collective American consciousness.

As far as representations of Iran in the United States are concerned, before the digital era’s full development and the ubiquity of the majority of present-day online information sources, Betty Mahmoody’s trend-setting international bestseller was the first major work of popular literature on Iran. *Not without My Daughter* (1987; henceforth *NWMD*) and its eponymous 1991 Hollywood film version introduced large sections of the American public and, by extension the West, to post-revolutionary Iran and perpetuated the wave of Iranophobia initiated in earnest by the advent of Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution.

Not without My Daughter chronicles the author’s marriage-gone-wrong to an American-educated Iranian-born anesthesiologist, Seyed Bozorg Mahmoody – known in the book by the nickname “Moody” – who had lived in the United States for more than two decades. According to the text, in August 1984, at the time of Iraq’s war against Iran, she encouraged her husband to travel to Iran for what she claims was meant to be a two-week holiday.⁵ The holiday, however, allegedly stretched into an eighteen-month “entrapment” from which Betty liberates herself when she purportedly puts her life, and that of her six-year-old daughter, on the line by fleeing the country through the mountains on the border between Iran and Turkey in the dead of winter.

The text, however, is no typical action-and-suspense thriller. While on the surface Mahmoody’s memoir narrates the account of a failed intermarriage

between an American woman and her Iranian husband, as Roksana Bahramitash has argued, the story is “presented in a sensational narrative that portrays Iran of the mid-1980s and Islam as essentially brutal, frightening, and exceptionally misogynist.”⁶ Therefore, given the book’s unprecedented popularity, one could argue that no single work of literature has ever tarnished the public image of Iran and the average Iranian on such a global scale as Mahmoody’s memoir (and its movie adaptation) has done. The text, in other words, can be considered one of the classic Orientalist narratives of the late twentieth century that pioneered a generation of neo-Orientalist memoirs on Iran in the first decade of the new millennium, particularly after 9/11.

Almost immediately, *NWMD* emerged as an international bestseller “on three continents” (i.e., Australia, North America, and Europe), was translated into more than twenty languages, and sold about 12 million copies (the statistics come from Mahmoody’s second book, *For the Love of a Child* [1992]).⁷ It also launched the author’s meteoric career, earning her numerous awards and titles.⁸ Melani McAlister has observed that when the book first appeared in 1987, “it was reviewed positively and prominently in the major book publications; reviewers called it a ‘compelling drama’ and a ‘riveting inside look at everyday life in Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary paradise.’”⁹ Also, its extraordinary success inspired the publication of no less than thirteen similar “true stories” between 1987 and 1998.¹⁰ A quick survey of the reviews both in print media and on online platforms reveals the extent to which *NWMD* continues to be read as an “authentic” story some three decades after its publication.

The publication of *NWMD* soon posited Mahmoody as a cognoscente on Iran, Islam, intercultural marriage, as well as international abduction cases. Her “expertise” was not only employed by radio and television programs, but also by sections of the American government. In the sequel, *For the Love of a Child* (1992), Mahmoody intimates that she acts “as an ongoing consultant to the State Department,” has served as the chief investigator for legislation passed in Michigan relating to international kidnapping, and has appeared “as an expert witness” in divorce trials.¹¹

In the almost total absence of academic critiques – which might be partly accounted for by the text’s belonging to the category of “low literature” – and the predominantly enthusiastic reviews of it, objections were voiced mainly by diasporic Iranian intellectuals or binational organizations, which suffered the most from the demonization of the Iranian/Muslim culture and cross-cultural relationships. Thus, as the first critical analysis of the text, this study illustrates how it operates within the tradition of American captivity narratives, which partly explains its enthusiastic reception in the West. Out of this narrative of alleged captivity, the image that emerges of Iran is that of

a land that seems to be irremediably primitive, misogynistic, fanatical, and contaminated.

Captivity as The Pilgrim's Progress

Stories of captivity and incarceration did not grow popular overnight, and not without good reason. Quite the contrary. The continued popularity and wide readership of American captivity narratives are grounded in a variety of historico-political and religious dynamics. Far from developing in a vacuum, the genre's genesis and development owes much to the deep-seated roots in the American public's collective literary and political consciousness. *Not Without My Daughter*, the latter-day embodiment of such narratives, draws extensively on this literary tradition. More specifically, it exemplifies the category of literary writing known as "hostage narratives" that, according to Brian T. Edwards, are "sensationalistic accounts in the mainstream press that ... reincorporate a period two centuries or more ago in the vocabulary and logic of the [contemporary] period."¹²

Classical captivity narratives were often stereotypical accounts of white settlers, predominantly women, ensnared by "savage" foes. Be that as it may, the genre's malleability has allowed it to be aligned with the dominant zeitgeist at any given account's time of production. Owing to their often amateur authorship, their expressions of some form of desperation, and their origins in history, culture, and collective consciousness, such narratives have come to occupy a prominent place in American "low literature."¹³ They are part of a well-established literary genre, particularly popular from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. As such, their plots were far from convoluted and mostly composed of a foreseeable concatenation of events, predominantly in the form of reversals and twists of fate.

The thrust of such stories can usually be encapsulated in a white American woman being captured by Native Americans who snatch her away from a life of luxury and "liberty" to become entrapped in the clutches of "savages." Whether the captive walks into her solitary confinement unwittingly or is abducted against her will, she is made to suffer harrowing conditions and endure barbarous torments. Nevertheless, regardless of the ensuing tribulations, she eventually works her way out of the ordeal and is rescued by a combination of her tenacity, bravery, and God's grace. In the end, good always triumphs over evil and the victim returns home to tell the story of her survival, which is "all the more riveting for being true."¹⁴

For centuries, the predominant view of captivity narratives has been that of a rather monolithic genre constructed upon certain well-established princi-

ples of diegesis and narrative content. Richard Vanderbeets, for instance, has defined them as “a single genre” whose “fundamental informing and unifying principle” is a ritualistic journey through the archetypal separation, transformation, and return phases.¹⁵ However, as the genre gradually became a subject of academic scholarship and literary critique, its perception as a unified literary tradition came into question. Tracing the development of captivity narratives over the past few centuries reveals that this substantial corpus can neither be encapsulated into a single genre nor considered as exclusively American.¹⁶

Roy Harvey Pearce has categorized this wide-ranging body of literature into three main subgenres, arguing that despite their “natural basic unity of content,” captivity narratives have developed and changed course over the centuries and that the genre has “shape[d] and reshape[d] itself according to varying cultural needs.”¹⁷ Penned mostly by early Puritan frontierspeople, the first and greater share of captivity narratives were “simple, direct religious documents”¹⁸ comprised of a classic religious pattern of abduction (or “removal”), affliction, and redemption. Tapping into deeply ingrained perceptions of history and Puritan ideological traditions, these narratives placed the familiar story of “providential deliverance” into the context of “the American Indian frontier.”¹⁹

Captivity was no far-fetched concept for the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century American Christians. In fact, it was a key component of their religious credo to view the entire human existence as a pilgrimage through various imprisonments. From the “welbelov’d” *in utero* prison, man was perceived as cast out into the “lower prisons” of this “fallen world” only to find his/her soul imprisoned within fleshly confines.²⁰ Similarly, they envisioned Heaven and Hell in terms of their spatial and physical attributes: The former was characterized by an open spaciousness, whereas the latter was described in carceral terms. In a similar fashion, they defined “the life of sin as a terrible enslavement and the life of faith in a fallen world as servitude, a ‘sweet captivitie to God.’”²¹

Two doctrinal traditions underlie the first category of captivity narratives. First, they are steeped in the ideology of Providentialism: they chronicle the vicissitudes of the captives’ traumatizing ordeals and their eventual salvation by “the gracious providence of God.”²² In such Puritan narratives, the captivity experience assumes a symbolic significance. No matter how harrowing, what befalls the captors is part of a greater divine scheme and “evidences of God’s inscrutable wisdom.”²³ As villainous as the Indians may seem in such stories, they are God’s instruments, “actors in a divine drama.”²⁴

Second, underwritten in these narratives is “a doctrine of afflictions that welcomed suffering and adversity by defining them as corrective, instructive, and profitable.”²⁵ Both the captivity experience *in toto* and the specific chastisements the victims suffer signify his/her “elect” status: separation, captivity,

and torment only highlight the captive's "chosenness."²⁶ The notion of "election" is mentioned in the Bible as "whom the lord loveth he chasteneth"²⁷ and has been internalized by Christian Evangelicism. This, in fact, indicates another feature in such early captivity narratives: the familiar Puritan medium of drawing on Biblical symbolism and allusions. These narratives are "saturated in biblical language,"²⁸ and such references function as a vicarious medium connecting the captive's journey and her destiny to that of a nation.²⁹

The gradual transition from the Age of Faith to the Age of Enlightenment occasioned a decisive shift away from the spiritual roots of captivity narratives.³⁰ Gradually, the genre's straightforward, first-hand, and religious character gave way to a novel development: The captives' personal experiences were exploited for social purposes, which made the shift toward propagandistic narratives dominant. One significant feature of these narratives is what Pearce has termed "stylization": the concern with a verbatim recounting of the ordeal and faithfulness to its particularities began to dissipate and writing the story by an external literary agent came to find "a kind of journalistic premium."³¹ Hence, the first-hand personal experiences of devout Puritan captives were supplanted by "the writing of the hack and the journalist."³²

However, even though the initial authors of such accounts were not men and women of letters, it would be naïve to assume that they were literary virgins "bringing pure and unadulterated stories to a corrupting print market."³³ The captives' own responses to their ordeals were also conditioned by the fictions to which they had been exposed. In propagandistic narratives, the captivity experience turns into an instrument principally at the service of promoting loathing and fear of the Other, with the typical writer's intent being "to register as much hatred of the ... Indians as possible,"³⁴ as opposed to the workings of God's all-encompassing providential design.

There is a "natural" shift from the propagandistic tract to the third sub-genre: the "out-and-out sensational."³⁵ Like propaganda narratives, the outright melodramatic narratives are penned mostly by individuals other than those who were directly involved in the captivity experience. The more captivity narratives steered away from the initial, more "truthful," direct, and personal accounts, the more they were "stylized." As a result, the latest category of captivity narratives is characterized by a "journalistic extremity of language and style."³⁶ From the mid-eighteenth century onward, it was common practice to spice up and "stylize" the narratives by interpolating as much fictional padding as possible to render them more journalistically worthwhile. Greater stylization in these later narratives indeed came at the cost of an almost total lack of concern for the principles of accuracy and authenticity, as the only concern of their derivative authors was the "salability of penny dreadful."³⁷

These later generations of classic captivity narratives are notorious *mélanges* of fact and fiction. Even though, according to Pearce, many of them might be true in substance, they are “built up out of a mass of crude, sensationally presented details.”³⁸ The greater share of such stories exist to illustrate that Indian atrocities and their significance are mainly “vulgar, fictional, and pathological.”³⁹ Eventually, in the latest subcategory so much liberty was taken with the original stories that a great many of them evince little or no pretense at authenticity. By this time (the mid- to late-eighteenth century), the publication of such stories had become, more than anything, “an occasion for an exercise in blood and thunder and sensibility.”⁴⁰ The predominance of pulp thriller captivity narratives and the almost total absence of any sense of verisimilitude led to a few authors appending a truth-swearing affidavit to the later editions of their stories.⁴¹

The genre’s progressive course does not culminate with the sensational thriller. Captivity narratives, and especially the second and third subgenres, are characterized by the persistent interlacing of preexisting fiction and alleged lived experience. In addition, they are usually deemed to have some measure of substance, however infinitesimal that might be. This is one of the features that has problematized the study of such narratives through a single disciplinary lens and exemplifies the “porous boundary between history and imaginative literature.”⁴² Out of the sensational shockers grew narratives that were published as genuine and truthful accounts, but were, in actuality, “out-and-out fakes.”⁴³ However, the blood-and-thunder narratives had indulged in such a wild extremity of language and content that they differed from the outright hoax narratives only “in the degree of their absurdity.”⁴⁴ In short, the transposition of one type of captivity narrative with another signified a progressive secularization that paved the way for propaganda and sensationalism, which, in turn, meant “increasing exploitation – increasing disregard for the particularities of the experience recounted as well as for the language of its appropriation.”⁴⁵

Captivity narratives have been described as “persistent, protean, profusely distributed over time and space and often downright plebeian.”⁴⁶ Embedded in the archetypal works, just like in any other context-specific phenomenon, is a built-in obsolescence. Thus, to survive the restrictions of temporal and historical specificity, the genre has been regenerated through various adaptive stratagems and has reappeared in new forms. Both as a mode of writing and thinking, this protean nature of such narratives enables them to be readapted and reshaped according to different cultural and political climates. Thus, although with each new U.S. adventure new frontiers and foes were constructed, the classical *topos* has remained largely unadulterated.⁴⁷

It is against the backdrop of this literary tradition and elasticity of appropriation that *NWMD* functions as an archetypal latter-day captivity narrative. Like many later classical captivity narratives, *NWMD* constructs a discursive space wherein the genre's three subgenres converge. The narrative is informed by an undergirding religiosity, which draws on Puritan ideas of punishment and salvation; it is a propagandistic tract in the sense that it promulgates popular and political propaganda about Iran, Islam, the Islamic revolution, and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war; and the numerous instances of exaggeration, myth, and disinformation qualify it as a highly sensationalized pulp thriller.

The religious underpinning at work in Mahmoody's memoir warrants the perusal of the story as a religious journey or a purgation narrative. The first stage in this regard is "removal." In one of the earliest and best-known prototypical captivity narratives, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), Mary Rowlandson describes her "first remove" and how she was taken away from "house and home and all our comforts within door and without."⁴⁸ In a similar vein, the white American Christian author flies from her "fallen world" of American luxury and privilege into the "trap" that would be her alleged cell for eighteen months. She is held "captive"⁴⁹ both by her "tormentor" and the entire "backward" nation,⁵⁰ not to mention being purportedly forced to suffer the most extraordinary afflictions. Nevertheless, her resolve never seems to dwindle in the face of adversity. She constantly seeks help and redemption from God, and her resilience comes to fruition when at long last she manages to escape and tell her "true" story to fellow Christians.

It was customary for captive-writers, and later for hack writers, to describe the place of their captivity as "hell." In Rowlandson's account, for instance, the locale and the settings of captivity, along with the captors' rituals, make the place "a lively resemblance of hell."⁵¹ Similarly, the infernal imagery deployed in *NWMD* highlights the religiosity of the experience. The summer heat is "hellish,"⁵² Betty's ordeal is described as going through "hell,"⁵³ and the country itself is often described as "hell."⁵⁴

Even though the afflictions that captives undergo become more meaningful when placed in the framework of God's omniscient providence, Betty's torment seems to be caused also by her "betrayal" of her faith by marrying a Muslim, and perhaps by not attending her Free Methodist Church.⁵⁵ The ordeal, however, reunites the author with her abandoned faith. In times of distress, Betty's only recourse is her regained religious faith, exemplified in her many prayers to God and her wish to read the Bible: "God was my only companion through the tedious days and nights. I spoke with Him constantly."⁵⁶ For early American Christians, despair was a grave sin "born of failure of con-

fidence of election.”⁵⁷ In captivity narratives, the captives constantly oscillate between near despair and hope, but never completely surrender.⁵⁸ The same pattern is evident in *NWMD*, for, despite many moments of “despair,”⁵⁹ Betty manages to find rays of hope in her faith and never acquiesces.

Mahmoody also makes it clear that her predicament was compounded by her religious faith: the fact that she was a non-Muslim “trapped” in a Muslim country. Nonetheless, reinvigorated by her regained faith, she places her trust in God’s judgment:

Moody centered much of his wrath upon the fact that I was not Moslem. “You will burn in the fires of hell,” he screamed at me. “And I am going to heaven. Why do you not wake up?”
 “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” I replied softly, trying to appease him. “I’m not a judge. Only God is a judge.”⁶⁰

The text includes other occasions when Moody treats his wife harshly apparently for no other reason than being a Christian. When she objects to Moody isolating her from her dying father, he replies:

“Is your father Moslem?” he asked sarcastically.
 “No, of course not.”
 “Then it does not matter,” Moody said. “He does not count.”⁶¹

Mahmoody’s references to Islam as an exclusionary religion stand in stark contrast to Islam’s view of the people of other faiths, explicitly spelled out in various Qur’anic passages:

Those who believe (in the Qur’an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabaeans – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Q. 2:62)

Significantly, far from preaching religious exclusionism, Islam forbids imposing Islam on non-Muslims⁶² and considers Christians the “nearest in love” to Muslims.⁶³

The preceding examples illustrate what Mahmoody depicts as the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Muslims and Christians, or between the Muslim East and the secular or Christian West, reinforced by a purported Muslim antipathy toward non-Muslims – a fallacy that contradicts Islam’s most basic tenets. In fact, Islamic teachings are strongly averse to any form of discrimination. Even a cursory glance at early Islamic history would indicate its egalitarian insistence on deracialization and human equality, re-

ardless of a person's race and social status. Such a stance threatened its very existence right at its inception, for the ruling plutocracy in Makkah's highly stratified society routinely enslaved people, especially those of different races. Unsurprisingly, her account does not mention the peaceful co-existence of Iran's Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, who not only have always been part of the fabric of Iranian society but are also officially represented in Parliament.

The same religious underpinning and sharp contrast between Islam and Christianity figure prominently in the movie as well, which has led some reviewers to reaffirm such religious binarism. One of the reviews, for instance, presents the film as a testament to "the true horrors and evils of Islam, from the denial of female sexuality in husband/wife relationships to the fanatical religiosity which drives this people."⁶⁴ Beside the review's representation of Islam as "evil," the fact that there is not even a hint of this supposed "denial" either in the book or the movie renders the claim even more bizarre. The reviewer then goes on to elaborate the movie's significance for its intended western Christian audience:

Sally Field, who plays Betty Mahmoody, gives a strong witness for Christ. In the film, the work of this believer stands the test of fire; and, for Christian viewers, it has the effect of building one's faith ... [I]t is shown through one woman's dynamic, personal relationship with the Lord is she able to overcome her circumstances. This is, after all, what Christianity is all about.⁶⁵

Betty's deliverance is also well-aligned with that of the "heroines" in traditional captivity narratives. In classical narratives, especially in the earlier accounts, the captives invariably attribute their redemption to God's "grace," "mercy," or "wisdom": "Mahtob and I pray[ed] our thanks to God for survival and renew[ed] our desperate pleas for deliverance."⁶⁶ In a similar vein, Mahmoody writes in her second book: "There is no explanation for what happened. I believed we were saved by the grace of God."⁶⁷ The idea of deliverance is fundamental to some captivity narratives, and the double position of the captive-author as survivor-savior characterizes Mahmoody's narrative, too.

Before illustrating principles of the second and third subgenres of such narratives in *NWMD*, it is important to demonstrate how they function as cautionary tales that are meant to be redemptive for Western, especially Christian, readers.

Tales of Caution and the Mixed Marriage Menace

Captivity narratives are characterized by a strong cautionary and redemptive religious underpinning, wherein the faithful (Puritan) white American was often cast as a figure whose predicament and affliction served to caution and salvage the lives of other potential victims. Richard Slotkin has observed that:

The ordeal [of captivity] is at once threatful of pain and evil and promising of ultimate salvation. Through the captive's proxy, the promise of a similar salvation could be offered to the faithful among the reading public, while the captive's torments remained to harrow the hearts of those not yet awakened to their fallen nature.⁶⁸

In a similar vein, *NWMD* possesses a significant cautionary underpinning of a rather didactic character, which is continued and elaborated at greater length in Mahmoody's second narrative. Readers are invited to exercise caution against the often "veiled threats" that the "primitive East" and the Muslim Other pose by virtue of the "menacing" attributes they possess. Like almost any principal leitmotif of such narratives, this cautionary element can also be traced to the American captivity narrative tradition. In this light, the (predominantly white, Western, and Christian) readership's reception of *NWMD* and kindred narratives can be partly accounted for in terms of its cautionary and redemptive nature.

Authors narrated their ordeals not only as a means of coming to terms with the indelible agonies and traumas they allegedly had experienced, but, *a fortiori*, also as a way of cautioning others by taking it upon themselves to awaken and enlighten them. This socially and religiously significant role was both assumed by the authors – as dutiful, devout Christians – and conferred upon them by their audience by virtue of the position of authority and authenticity they established by the narration and reception of their stories. In her epistolary captivity novel, *The History of Maria Kittle* (1779), Ann Eliza Bleecker declares her intention to open "the sluice gates of her readers' eyes,"⁶⁹ a statement that conflates her benevolent intention, via the extent of horror that she will expose.

Classical captivity narratives spoke to two potential spiritual dangers simultaneously: that of hubris and self-contentment bred by the awareness of one's elect status, and that of despair. Remaining vigilant and unbeleaguered necessitated that good Puritans retain an "imperfect assurance" and remain in a constant in-betweenness, a reality that prompted a dual necessity: the need to familiarize oneself with "the noble operations of the blessed Spirit" against which they could judge their own experiences, and the need to produce one's own account, to narrate one's own spiritual journey as a sign that

“one’s own name, too, was listed among the elect.”⁷⁰ As Minter argues, embedded in the very act of writing is “the conviction . . . that it can enter their ongoing struggles with salvation.”⁷¹ The acts of reading, listening to, and writing such narratives are made extensions of that “imperfect certainty,” junctures in the eternal drama of salvation that, for Puritans, held no promise of closure before death.

The act of writing also highlights the role of the American captive-writer as a Christ-like figure whose suffering is meant to be redemptive for the readers – a role that Mahmoody assumes by attempting to “save” other American women undergoing similar circumstances, as evidenced by the sequel to *NWMD*. This redemption, however, cannot materialize if the story remains untold. Also, authors of more recent strains of captivity narratives have sought solace in the act of writing as a way of surmounting their past predicaments, a mode of writing that Suzette A. Henke designated as “scripto-therapy.”⁷² In her second book, Mahmoody thus describes the therapeutic effect of composing her story: “I was angry when I wrote the book. It was like therapy for me.”⁷³

Captivity authors also took it upon themselves to caution their readers against venturing across the normative racial, cultural, and religious frontiers, especially where mixed marriages are concerned. Modern captivity narratives of the last few decades are marked by a growing obsession about the intermarriage of western *women*, dominated by a discourse revolving around the “menace” inherent in cross-cultural romances, which are purportedly bound to culminate in a doomed cul-de-sac.⁷⁴ Embedded in the intercultural marriage is an alarming sense of foreboding that is certain to transpire when the captivity, or whatever other tragedy awaits the western woman, at long last transpires. Such marriages are depicted not only as endangering western women themselves; rather, by extension, they put the entire western society to which they belong at risk.

In this narrative, western women function as gateways to the western world and, therefore, their marriage to non-westerners are deemed as posing a threat to western civilization. Consequently, western women who transgress the bounds of the “colour line of love”⁷⁵ are deemed as compromising western nation-states. Thus, the authors’ “mistake” should make their audiences wary of mixed marriages and dissuade them from treading the “wrong” path. Against this backdrop, the authors are cast as “cultural reproducers of the West,” empowered through their first-hand experience to pass judgment on the propriety of social behavior and to “exert control over other women who are constructed as deviants.”⁷⁶ Finally, it is worth mentioning that the freedom of choice manifested in the possibility of committing this “mistake” is, in fact, what distinguishes the involuntary captivity of the white western woman in

classical accounts from the relatively conscious transgression of later “learned Foolhardies.”⁷⁷

Propagandizing Captivity

Even though a strong religious underpinning does inform Mahmoody’s narrative, its propagandistic and sensational aspects take precedence. Not only is the account ridden with propaganda of all sorts against Iranian culture and politics, as well as Islam, its instant celebrity provided the author with diverse platforms to continue disseminating such propaganda. This propagandization is carried out, among other things, mostly through the perpetuation of various myths, many of which recur in many later neo-Orientalist writings on Iran. One such myth, for instance, is the existence of the country’s apparently summary capital punishment system. In Mahmoody’s Iran, so we are told, all crimes and offences – regardless of their nature – seem to be punishable by execution. On the book’s title page, for instance, Mahmoody declares:

This is a true story. The characters are authentic, the events are real. But the names and identifying details of certain individuals have been disguised in order to protect them and their families against the possibility of arrest and execution by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

On several other occasions, Mahmoody claims that birth control is illegal and women can be put to death for using contraception of any kind⁷⁸: “Suddenly, there in my hand was the bit of plastic and copper (i.e., an IUD) that could condemn me to death.”⁷⁹ In reality, however, even though contraception has been at times religiously controversial, it has never been illegal. Similarly, capital punishment is reserved only for such major felonies as murder, rape, and heavy drug trafficking. Indeed, in a country where Mahmoody claims that one can be “sentenced to six years in prison” for “thinking against the government”⁸⁰ – a claim that simply defies reason – it should come as no surprise if someone were executed for using contraception or fled across the border illegally.

Another myth popularized by the book is the abduction of underage boys to fight on the war front. Mahmoody quotes a friend of hers who stated:

When they [the revolutionary guards] see a group of boys, they pick them up and take them to the war... They do this at school, too. Sometimes they take a truck to a boy’s school and take away the boys to be soldiers. Their families never see them again.”⁸¹

Despite Mahmoody's claim, it is a widely acknowledged fact that the country's defense against the 1980 Iraqi-imposed and western-backed war was so popularly supported that hundreds of thousands of volunteers joined the Iranian forces,⁸² for in the aftermath of the revolution Iran's army was still fledgling.

Another fiction, one that is also regurgitated in other neo-Orientalist memoirs on Iran, is the myth that Iran's "Revolutionary Guards" rape virgin girls before executing them. Mahmoody summarizes it as: "Inevitably they raped their women victims – young girls too – before they killed them. I shuddered as I remembered their horrid saying: 'A woman should not die a virgin.'"⁸³ The claim also appears in other passages.⁸⁴ As Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Hossein Pir-najmuddin have argued, there is no evidence that such systematic rapes ever occurred, for the underlying philosophy is simply non-existent.⁸⁵ In fact, rape is a first-degree felony that often results in the perpetrator's execution.

Mahmoody's account contains more than a few such myths, blunders, and contradictions. Linda Colley has interpreted such untruths as a sign of lack of authenticity and concluded that "narratives which draw on an individual's genuine exposure to captivity rarely make this kind of mistake."⁸⁶ A detailed discussion of the numerous other inaccuracies, exaggerations, and downright fabrications is beyond the scope of this study. However, one can refer to such examples as erroneous information on Iranian and Islamic divorce laws,⁸⁷ the highly exaggerated demographics of Tehran at the time,⁸⁸ the non-existent concept of "Islamic cooking,"⁸⁹ false information about Shi'i customs and practices,⁹⁰ and the many exaggerations and fabrications vis-à-vis Iranian culture, religion, and politics as well as Islamic laws and practices.⁹¹

Characteristically, captivity narratives stemmed from some sort of reality and were worked into something horrific and absurd.⁹² Quite similar to these classical sensational narratives, *NWMD* is fraught with overtly sensational details, which place the book in the "noisomely visceral thriller" category.⁹³ Pearce has argued that many such narratives are informed by an "American Gothicism." They "delight in gruesomeness" and capitalize on "the luxury of sorrow," "the luxury of horror" and "all that such narratives had come to mean for American readers – a meaning which rose out of emphasis on physical terror, suffering and sensationalism."⁹⁴ The following passage is only one of the instances that exemplify the emphasis on gruesome imagery:

Moody grabbed me, threw me to the floor, and pounced upon me. He seized my head in his hands and banged it repeatedly against the floor ... Moody bit into my arm deeply, drawing blood. I screamed, wriggled free from his

grasp, and managed to kick him in the side. But this produced anger more than pain. He grabbed me with his two mighty arms and threw me to the hard floor. I landed on my spine and felt pains shoot the entire length of my body. Now I could barely move. For many minutes he stood over me cursing violently, kicking at me, bending over to slap me. He yanked me across the floor by pulling at my hair. Tufts came loose in his hand.⁹⁵

Besides drawing on the literary tradition of captivity narratives, *NWMD* also capitalizes on contemporary American political collective consciousness, which renders it a modern prototype of “hostage narratives” – a more contemporary variation of classical captivity narratives. As such, its production and reception was conditioned by what is commonly known in the West as the “Iran Hostage Crisis.” Less than a year after the revolution, on November 4, 1979, a group of revolutionary university students took some sixty-odd Americans hostage from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, apparently in reaction to the deposed Shah being admitted into the U.S. and in exchange for his extradition. On a more profound level, the hostage taking was the outward expression of a deep and longstanding Iranian apprehension that like the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup d’état that removed Mohammad Mosaddeq, Iran’s first democratically elected prime minister and reinstated the Shah, Washington would organize another putsch and squelch the fledgling revolution at its inception. By dint of this political crisis, “an indelible sense of anguish etched itself into the collective memory of a justifiably outraged nation”⁹⁶ and all relations between the two countries were severed.

Consequently, hostage taking now became the most recurrent leitmotif in the realm of media and literature, owing much to the nightly crisis updates on prime-time American television news programs. The representations and reception of the crisis in the United States as well as “the discourse of terrorist threat” at that time also owed a great deal to the tradition of American captivity narratives.⁹⁷ The hostage crisis remains paramount in understanding the complexities of the strained Iran-United States relationship and is essential to analyzing representations of Iran in the United States. Stephen Kinzer has argued that “To this day [Americans] are still living under the emotional overhang of the hostage crisis of 1979,”⁹⁸ in much the same way as the memory of the U.S.-engineered coup has remained alive in Iran.

As a fully-fledged captivity/hostage narrative, *NWMD* operates on two parallel levels. On one level it recounts the physical entrapment of a white Christian American woman in a land she persistently describes as “hell.” Expressions of this mode of entrapment appear on the front and back covers of almost all versions of the book. The publisher’s blurb on one edition

urges readers: “Imagine yourself alone and vulnerable. Imagine yourself ... trapped by a husband you thought you trusted, and held prisoner in his native Iran, a land where women have no rights and Americans are despised.” This short blurb establishes the image of the American “victim” as innocent, vulnerable, and betrayed; portrays the Iranian Other as menacing and untrustworthy; draws on the patriotic sentiments of American readers by informing them of another country’s alleged hatred toward them; and, finally, reiterates the clichéd image of the oppressed Muslim woman deprived of all her rights.

Similarly, the back cover of another edition reads: “Mother and daughter became prisoners of an alien culture, hostages of an increasingly tyrannical and violent man.” As demonstrated above, the choice of the word “hostage” and its synonyms, which are reiterated throughout the book⁹⁹ is anything but coincidental. They are, on the contrary, *mots justes* that conjure up the memory of the hostage crisis and catalyze one’s emotional engagement with the melodrama. Mahmoody expresses her alleged captivity in an early soliloquy: “Was this real? Were Mahtob and I prisoners? Hostages? Captives of the venomous stranger who had once been a loving husband and father?”¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere, she ponders that if she left Iran without her daughter, “Mahtob would be trapped in this crazy country with her insane father.”¹⁰¹

Betty’s alleged captivity and entrapment happens on two planes. Domestically, she is “imprisoned” in her sister-in-law’s and later her own house, respectively, either because her actions have incurred her husband’s wrath or for no particular reason at all. While her husband leaves the house or goes to the hospital to work, she remains incarcerated in the house:

[The window] was unlocked, sliding open to my touch. I poked my head through and gauged the possibilities. I could scramble through this window easily enough and reach the landing, but I would still be held captive by the heavy iron street door, which was always locked.¹⁰²

The author is purportedly cut off from the outside world and even if she attempted to break away from the confines of her prison-home, the “dutiful Islamic spies”¹⁰³ would inform on her. All the places in which she lives are described in carceral vocabulary, and her husband and his extended family are often described as her captors, kidnappers, jailers, and hostage-takers.¹⁰⁴ On a larger plane yet, the entire city of Tehran mutates into a metropolitan prison circumscribed by the mountain ranges that serve as its towering walls:

The countryside was beautiful, to be sure, but the beauty was the result of gargantuan mountain ranges rising higher and standing out in sharper relief than the Rockies of the western United States. They ringed Tehran on all sides, turning the entire city into a trap.¹⁰⁵

Mahmoody's representation of these mountains resonates with the Puritan view of nature as "sinister captivity" and the "vast, desolate howling wilderness ... as most formidably the devil's own."¹⁰⁶ Even when she is out of her prison-home, she finds herself trapped in the city's confines. It is not only her husband-captor or his relatives whom she views as her prison guards, for the city's entire populace plays the paradoxical double role of her captors and inmates.

On a yet more macroscopic level, the entire country transmutes into a massive prison-nation from which Betty strives to escape. Even when she is out of her prison-home and away from the prison-capital, she is still behind the greater bars of Iran. This hostage imagery pervades almost the entire text. In one notable instance, the author describes her "entrapment" in "a country that, to me, had seemed populated almost totally with villains."¹⁰⁷ Mahmoody's insistence on being "entrapped" in a society of "villains" is underpinned by the Puritan parameters that viewed society as a "lesser prison of this lower world, but also as man's proper home, as scene of saintly pilgrimage."¹⁰⁸

The second parallel plane on which *NWMD* functions as a hostage narrative is best exemplified when it occurs to Betty, as if in an epiphany, that she is not a lone sufferer. Rather, it dawns on her that all Iranian women are her fellow-sufferers. Betty shares the experience of her captivity with her "cell-mates," whom she also often depicts as her captors and jailors: "Now I realized anew that these women were caught in a trap just as surely as I, subject to the rules of a man's world, disgruntled but obedient."¹⁰⁹ In another passage, when negotiating her escape with a liaison to smugglers and pondering the "professional network" of human smugglers and the reasons for its development, she concludes: "I was not the only one trapped in Iran. If life here was intolerable for me, surely there were millions of people all around me who shared the same sentiments."¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite these female "fellow-sufferers," she casts herself as somehow distinct from them. While she represents herself as actively resisting and challenging the system in which she finds herself captive, Iranian women are represented as not only acquiescent to it, but also as reinforcing and legitimizing it through their "silence."

What is of particular significance in analyzing the depiction of Iranian women's literal and figurative incarceration is the fact that their "imprisonment," both on the domestic and broader scales, is framed within a more ho-

listic ideological paradigm. In Mahmoody's eyes, lying at the root of their physical, spiritual, domestic, and existential incarceration is the same rationale that justifies the Iranian/Muslim man's alleged cruelty and misogyny and the government's "fanaticism." The culprit is none other than the now-all-too-familiar root of all evils: Islam.

According to the author, before being imprisoned in her house or country, the Muslim woman is shackled by her "immobilizing" faith, "locked up inside her mandatory veil—a mobile prison shrunk to the size of her body."¹¹¹ In a variety of its different forms and synonyms, among them *hejab*, *chador*, *roosarie*, and *manteaux*, the trope of the veil resurfaces on almost every page. Its omnipresence, however, is anything but merely descriptive. The veil, and especially the *chador*, is exploited to the fullest to reiterate and reinforce the alleged invisibility of Iranian Muslim women and to portray them as suppressed by their "restrictive" faith, "cloaked in the omnipresent heavy black chador."¹¹² Invited to a family gathering, Betty cannot but notice how all around her "hovered insolent, superior-looking men" while "women wrapped in chadors sat in quiet subservience."¹¹³

Characteristically, even her definition is erroneous: "A chador is a large, half-moon-shaped cloth entwined around the shoulders, forehead, and chin to reveal only eyes, nose, and mouth."¹¹⁴ In reality, however, Islam does not require a woman to cover her face and the garment is not meant to cover any part of the face. As such this misleading definition, only one of the many common forms of hijab in Muslim countries, seems purposely distorted to reinforce the alleged oppression, invisibility, and incarceration of Iranian and, by extension, Muslim women. Mahmoody goes on to add to her description of the chador that "the effect [of the chador] is reminiscent of a nun's habit in times past,"¹¹⁵ thus invoking the Orientalist trope of the backwardness and medievalism of Muslim culture. In this context, the chador is represented as anachronistic and Iran as a country frozen in a dark, primitive past. Chador-clad women are not only portrayed as "backward" by virtue of their "antiquated and even unhealthy dress code,"¹¹⁶ but their very deportment and countenance are also represented as all the more uncouth and uncivilized.

Upon his arrival in Tehran, Moody is "engulfed" by "a mob of robed veiled humanity that clawed at his business suit and wailed in ecstasy."¹¹⁷ The description reduces Iranian individuals to a "mob," thus stripping them of their identity and individuality. This image is then further reinforced by the words "robed" and "veiled," which render the Iranian/Muslim Other even more faceless. Thus the American woman, her (westernized) husband in his "business suit," and their daughter, three western individuals with names known to the reader, are posited in stark contrast to a "mob" of anonymous Iranians. Fur-

thermore, the animal imagery used, as evidenced in the use of “claw” and “wailing in ecstasy,” further contributes to the bestialization of the Iranian/Muslim Other and painting a frightening picture of Iran/Muslims early on in the narrative. Wondering why she is wearing “this stupid scarf,”¹¹⁸ Betty worries that she “must smell like the rest of them by now.”¹¹⁹

The chador seems to be the culprit for all that she deems wrong with the “veiled mob,” from their countenance and their “stench” to their demeanor. Betty does not want her “American” daughter to be raised in a country where not only women’s “beauty” but also their “spirit” and “soul” are “cloaked,” concerned as she is that her daughter would become “one of them.”¹²⁰ Mahmoody’s “fear of contamination” is in line with David Spurr’s observation that the fear “that begins by the biological” further develops “into anxiety over psychological perils of going native and finally into the dystopian view of vast social movements that threaten civilization itself.”¹²¹

Mahmoody makes no effort to dissimulate her abhorrence of the chador. Not only does she assert her loathing for it, but she also expresses her strong aversion to the Iranian women who wear it. Speculating about the education system and concluding that it is designed to produce only subservient women, she reveals her feelings for Iranians, particularly women, declaring that she “hated the sight of all Iranians, especially meek women in chadors,”¹²² thus legitimizing xenophobia and hatred toward people with a different cultural praxis.

One, therefore, can conclude that it is not only the physical space of the house, the city, or the country that shackles Iranian women, nor is it merely the presence of their “tyrannical” husbands or any other “superior-looking”¹²³ male; rather it is, according to the author, the very observance of Islamic practices that is at the root of Muslim women’s “backwardness.” In this light, the chador is not a symbol of religious observance but is transmogrified into shackles chained to the Iranian women’s body and souls. In *For the Love of a Child*, Mahmoody describes her reaction to shedding her “hated chador, the black fabric designed to cloak Iranian women from head to toe.”¹²⁴

According to her, not only is this imprisonment the fate of Iranian women, anyone who sets foot in Iran is also apparently bound to suffer the same lot. When Ellen, Betty’s American friend who has converted to Islam, tells her on the phone that she thinks Betty should tell Moody about her escape plan “out of her love for me and concern for my welfare and that of my daughter,”¹²⁵ she hangs up, “feeling an Islamic noose around her neck.”¹²⁶ Apparently, no matter where a Muslim woman lives, as long as she practices her religion she remains eternally subjugated, dominated, and cooped up. Even though Mahmoody sees Islam as the root of the “plight” of Iranian women and Muslim

nations in general, her (and arguably her ghost writer's) grasp of the religion and her understanding of Islamic history and tradition is minimal, as evidenced by numerous instances of ignorance, misunderstanding, and disinformation. Also, given that the author is restrained by her own faith in an Orientalist ideology, one could argue that she is "trapped" in more than one way.

Ghosting Ghastly Narratives

One of the oft-neglected or underestimated significant components in critiques of both classical and modern captivity narratives is the role of the co-authors, or ghosts, in the process of narrative selection and composition. Like much else about captivity narratives, the role of ghost authors in the construction of such narratives is anything but new. As early as the early eighteenth century, narratives of a more journalistic and propagandistic character were composed in more acceptably "literary" styles, somehow inflecting from the didacticism of the narratives of God's Providence and devout religiosity to the natives' "savagery." These narratives were either primarily produced or ghostwritten by hacks and journalists to enhance the conventional stylistic features and, consequently, to make the story more marketable.

In this light, the role of Mahmoody's ghost author is worth noting. William Hoffer, who co-authored the book with (or arguably for) her, has been described as an author who "has been spinning out international bestsellers for more than 20 years."¹²⁷ In his track record, Hoffer has such works as *Midnight Express* (1977), which could be considered the most recent predecessor of *NWMD*. *Midnight Express* is another tale of incarceration – only this time with a young white American man as the protagonist – in what the book blurbs describe as yet another "environment of hellish squalor": Turkey. Except for the transformation of the fabled Turkish harems into a hideous dungeon where torture, rape, and murder prevail, nothing in *Midnight Express* is untypical of the brand of Orientalism applied to Turkey.

Carol Stocker has argued that the book-cum-movie is only another tale that "depict[s] the Middle East as a malignant nightmare."¹²⁸ Zaim Dervis¹²⁹ and Aslihan Tokgöz¹³⁰ have also elaborated, in their analyses of representations of Turkishness, how Hoffer's book and the subsequent film engage in the crudest form of Orientalist essentialization and Othering of things Turkish. The following lines from the filmic adaptation of the book, uttered by Billy, the American protagonist, to the Turkish judge in court neatly summarize the dominant view of the story: "For a nation of pigs, it sure is funny you don't eat them. Jesus Christ forgave the bastards. But I can't. I hate them. I hate

you, I hate your nation and I hate your people.” Unsurprisingly, the film won much acclaim, two Oscars, and six Golden Globes.¹³¹

It should come as no surprise that a few years later *NWMD* resonated with strikingly similar passages and depictions of the Muslim Iranian Other. In *For the Love of a Child*, Mahmoody recounts how she came to choose Hoffer as her collaborator:

While in Tehran, I had heard about street demonstrations against *Midnight Express*, though the book and the movie based on it were banned there. I wanted to write with a person who had had such a profound effect on ordinary people in Iran – the people who had had such total control over my own life. . . . If this writer could move the Iranian fundamentalists so strongly in absentia, I thought, he must be very effective.¹³²

Hoffer was, in a sense, “very effective.” As a popular American author of melodramatic stories, he knew the marketing logistics as well as the political zeitgeist of the time that had largely shaped the popular taste of the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Even though *NWMD* fails to live up to standard literary conventions of narrative composition and stops at the level of the sensational and the propagandistic, Hoffer managed to “stylize” the raw story. In fact, much of its success is due to his contribution. Also, as far as offending the religious and national sensibilities of “fundamentalist” Iranians was concerned, Mahmoody and Hoffer did achieve their goal, since, as Bahramitash observed, the book “helped to incite racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Iranian feelings across Europe and North America.”¹³³

Conclusion

In *For the Love of a Child*, Mahmoody attributes the success of *NWMD*, what made it a “worldwide phenomenon,” to “the universality of its subject: the bond between parent and child, and the extreme to which people will go when the bond is threatened.”¹³⁴ She has also intimated that the book’s cause célèbre owes much to its “concern for the ordinary,” its focus on the minute, everyday particularities of Iranian lives: “No matter what people’s status, we all have an everyday home life and a natural interest in the routines of others.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, she ascribes her book’s phenomenal success to the fact that her story struck a ready chord with many fellow-sufferers, arguing that it elicited responses from those who had suffered in silence and inspired them to step out of the dark and tell their own stories.¹³⁶

Despite her attempt to frame the appeal of her narrative in terms of the universality of its topic and its engagement with the ordinary, such a rationale

is hardly convincing. A survey of the many reviews reveals that it was never promoted as a story revolving around this natural bond and that it evinces no “interest” in the ordinary daily lives of Iranian women. If anything, it portrays those lives as mundane, pathetic, and miserable. As described earlier, one of the major reasons for its appeal is rooted in its all-too-familiar plot: a white American Christian woman trapped in the land of the “enemy.” Mahmoody’s account conforms to her intended American audience’s expectations of post-revolutionary Iran by drawing on a long-established tradition of American captivity narratives.

This appeal is further reinforced by the lingering memory of the Iran hostage crisis, which was still fresh in the collective memory of the American public, thanks to the western mainstream media’s obsession with it. De Hart has argued that the story also owes its appeal to the “ongoing ancient animosity of Christianity towards Islam.”¹³⁷ Given the book’s considerably greater success in the predominantly Christian West, where “the clash of civilization” is increasingly adopted to account for cultural and religious differences between the two hemispheres, De Hart’s observation seems warranted.

Cross-cultural narratives can provide excellent grounds for cross-fertilization, mutual understanding, and reimagining the deeply entrenched Others. They are, alas, hardly employed to that end. With the United States’ need for new enemies, captivity narratives have gathered tremendous momentum and are repeatedly propagated in times of political turmoil. It should therefore come as no surprise that at a time when Iran-American tensions were high, a three-decade-old story of captivity reiterating much of what *NWMD* epitomizes appeared afresh in a Hollywood disguise in the film *Argo* (2012) and won the 2013 Oscar Award for Best Picture. Also, the fact that the award was announced by Michelle Obama from the Diplomatic Room of the White House speaks volumes about the nexus between political power and representation. Like *NWMD*, the film’s celebrity is yet another testament to captivity narratives’ protean nature and to the fact that such narratives never become defunct or go out of vogue; they merely reincarnate when the time is ripe.

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133. Bahramitash, "The War on Terror," 227.
134. Mahmoody, *For the Love*, 245.
135. Ibid., 245.
136. Ibid., 247.
137. De Hart, "Not without My Daughter," 53.